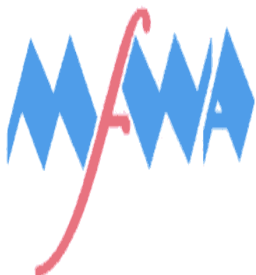




Freedom of Expression in Mali Improving

- Monitoring Report

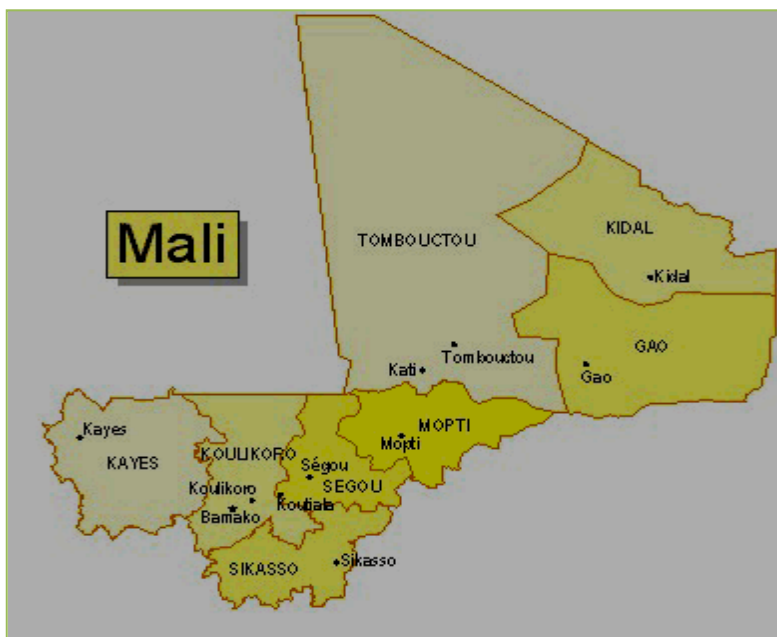


July & August, 2013

I. Introduction:

The Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA) monitoring continues to show appreciable improvements in conditions of Freedom of Expression (FoE), Media Development and Safety of journalists; general human rights and social conditions in the once conflict-devastated-Mali. Monitoring reports collated from MFWA network of monitors in Mali, show that general human rights conditions, FoE and the work of the media are progressing steadily.

These commendable improvements have come about as a result of the numerous interventions and efforts of the military as well as international, regional and national human rights organisations and groups. For instance, aside the concerted effort by the French-led military to fight off the rebel groups and restore peace, human rights groups undertook unique activities to sensitize political actors, citizens and the media to safety and peace-building processes. The primary aim of such activities was to avoid an increase in human rights violations and an escalation of the conflict.



It is worth also pointing out that assurances from international governments and donor agencies to financially assist Mali (on condition of a democratically elected government) contributed significantly to the holding of a peaceful presidential elections.

It is hoped that the election of a new president will usher in major reforms that will strengthen the structures of FoE, press freedom and general

human rights conditions in Mali.

The MFWA's monitoring exercise forms part of a joint project by the MFWA, Panos Institute of West Africa (PIWA) and the Copenhagen-based International Media Support (IMS) launched in May 2013, to help strengthen the Malian media to enable them contribute effectively to the peace-building and democratic processes in the country. The MFWA currently has a network of free expression rights monitors who monitor and

report on incidents of free expression rights violations in the country. The monitors are specifically assigned to Mali's three northern regions - Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, as well as the capital, Bamako.

This latest monitoring report summarises reports received from the monitors for the months of July and August, 2013. It is the second to be released by the MFWA and highlights significant issues relating to freedom of expression and safety of journalists, the state of media development and general human and social conditions in Mali. It is segmented into the following:

- General Human Rights/Social Conditions
- Media Development
- Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists

A. General Human Rights and Social Conditions in Mali

Primarily, improvements in Human Rights and social conditions during the monitoring period (July & August) were characterised by the peacefully held presidential elections, improvement in security and return on Malian refugees who had fled the country for safety.

Malians went to the polls twice to elect a President from among 28 candidates vying for the presidential seat. The first election was held on July 28, 2013 and a run-off held on August 11, 2013, after none of the 28 candidates achieved the needed 51% of votes cast. Eventually, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was declared the President after polling 71% of the total votes cast during the run-off.

The election received global and international praise for the peaceful manner in which it was conducted and the remarkable voter turnouts. Residents of the three northern regions particularly Kidal, where it was feared that voter turn-outs will be low, came out in their numbers to vote. *“Indeed the second round of the elections was conducted in calm and serenity,” confirmed MFWA’s monitor in Kidal.*

The success of the elections has brought major assurances to the Malian population of major social and democratic reforms as it has paved the way for the return of democratic rule. It gives a positive indication to international governments and donor agencies that

the country is willing to get back to its democratic status opening up chances for inflow of aid/support into the country.

Significantly the monitoring reports showed that the overall human rights situation in Mali is improving. Specifically, there are indications that the education sector has also seen appreciable improvements. For instance, *“students and teachers in the northern territories of the country have returned to the classroom and are preparing for their examination which was to have been held in June 2013, but was postponed till end of October 2013”*. Also, some refugees especially women and children who fled to neighbouring Mauritania and Niger have started returning home.

The monitoring also showed that the security situation has improved generally, although this still remains a challenge for the northern parts of the country. According to our monitors, it is widely believed that rebel groups and robbers still hold camps and hideouts in the desert and continue to harass and attack citizens. For instance, *“a 4x4 vehicle belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was abducted Friday, August 16 around Menaka Ansongo in the Kidal region. The abductors are believed to be armed men of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). They, however, left four passengers unharmed”*.

Local and administrative residences in Kidal are still occupied by armed groups and the MNLA, though the area is secured by UN forces and the Malian army. The few state employees are hosted momentarily by the Mayor of Kidal.

Also, residents and citizens in the North live with the suspicion that explosives and landmines are hidden in the ground, putting their lives at risk. According to our monitors, *“it is believed that over 50 persons have lost their lives or have been killed by such explosives”*; *“It is also feared that a number of minors were recruited into rebel camps during the conflict. Months after, however, these minors are yet to be seen or rescued”*.

A. Media Development

In view of the presidential elections scheduled for July, the monitoring period witnessed massive and vigorous training and sensitization programmes to strengthen the media for their role in national cohesion and development. One such workshop organised (August 5 – 6) by the Directorate of Information and Communication and the Department of

Peace and Security of the African Union (AU) resulted in a consensus for the establishment of a ‘centre for the exchange of experiences and best practices for journalists’ to enable them make assessment and draw lessons from the elections for the future.

Such training and capacity building sessions on media coverage and electoral issues looked at topics relating to preparation for coverage of elections, election vocabulary and knowledge, concepts and timing of elections, rights and duties of journalists during elections etc. Agencies and organisations such as the International Media Support (IMS), Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA), UNESCO, USAID, and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) among others continued with various capacity building activities aimed at promoting or enhancing the human and FoE situation in the country.

To enhance women’s participation and voices in political discourses and electoral processes, the Alliance of Female Media Owners (APPEM) also organised a workshop on the theme: “*Women and Elections*” (July 17-19) to sensitize the media on the need to involve women in public discourse and election programmes.

Communicators, bloggers and ICT journalists in Mali also received training to enhance their capacity in election reporting and ICT by The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in collaboration with the US Embassy (July 15 – 19, 2103).

There are clear indications of how the capacity building programmes impacted positively on the Malian media’s coverage of the presidential elections. It must be highlighted that the media played a critical role in educating citizens on the election process as well as granting the presidential candidates the platform to inform the citizens of their various manifestoes. The peace and stability in the country made it possible for Malians to take part in the electoral processes and exercise their right to vote. The balanced coverage and media platforms granted to the various presidential aspirants by the State-owned and some private media/journalists ensured that citizens were able to understand and appreciate the manifestoes of each aspirant. These efforts as well as other sensitizations by key CSOs and groups helped to calm the tensions around the elections.

B. Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists

Monitoring reports collated for the months of July and August point to an expansion of the media landscape and free expression rights in Mali with the opening of an additional

radio station. The new radio station called **Studio Tamani**, is a joint collaboration of the Union of Private Radio and Television Channels (URTEL), Office de Radio et Television du Mali (ORTM)-the State broadcaster, the European Union and the Fondation Hirondelle, as part of an 18-month project.

Studio Tamani, is housed on the premises of the Malian Press Centre and aims at producing and airing social programmes, news and debates that will promote national development and cohesion. It commenced broadcasting in August and is expected to broadcast in five major languages of Mali while its broadcast will also be relayed by 24 other radio stations spread throughout the country.

More media organisations and journalists have resumed their work with minimal fear and intimidation.

Unfortunately, however, the monitoring reports showed that “*Voice Radio Anefif*, the regional (Kidal) branch of the ORTEM is still in the hands of the MNLA and has since been renamed *Radio Azawad*”. The MFWA regrets this development as it has serious implications for Freedom of Expression. This could lead to control and censorship causing the radio station not to perform its functions well. It is therefore hoped that the situation will be tackled to allow the radio station to perform its critical function of educating, informing and entertaining the people.

General Challenges

Despite the noticeable improvements in the FoE and Media fronts in Mali, there exists a major challenge of the lack of electricity affecting citizens and the full operation by some media organisations, especially those in the North. It has been noted that towns and regions located in the northern part of the country are faced with electricity and water challenges - Residents of Kidal, Gao, Tombouktou and neighbouring towns have to endure long hours of living without electricity. This situation has also affected the operation of the media. Accordingly, though media organisations have resumed broadcasting, production is not consistent since electricity supply is off for the most part of the day.

CONCLUSION:

The recent peaceful elections resulting in a democratically elected leader in Mali provides a foyer of sustainability to the improvements in conditions of Freedom of Expression, safety of journalists and Media development in the country. This is a major boost to the peace and national cohesion. With regards to media freedom and safety as the country gradually strengthens its democracy, once again, there is cause to believe that the rights and respect for the media will be restored. Moreso, the continuing efforts and activities of organisations such as IMS, PIWA, IFJ, UNESCO etc and the proactiveness of the Ministry of Communications, will ensure the media remains professional in their work while their rights and safety is safeguarded.

Meanwhile, as part of the joint MFWA-IMS-PIWA project, the MFWA will continue to vigorously monitor and report on developments in Mali and support the Malian media to contribute effectively to the peace-building and democratic processes in the country.