

18 December 2021

Togo: End repression against journalists and civil society activists

Joint statement on Togo's escalating repression against journalists and civil society activists

The Togolese government has taken new steps to silence critical voices by arresting several journalists in the last few days.

We condemn the recent arrests of journalists Ferdinand Ayité, director of publication of the newspaper *L'Alternative* and Joël Egah, director of publication of the newspaper *Fraternité* who were placed under committal on 10 December following an accusation of 'contempt of authority and defamation'. They are accused of comments made in *L'Autre journal*, a popular current affairs programme broadcast on Youtube by the web-TV of the newspaper *L'Alternative*. Isidore Kouwonou, the presenter of the show was placed under judicial supervision. The arbitrary detention of journalists violates their right to freedom of expression, as enshrined in article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which Togo has ratified. These arrests come as Togo's legislation on the media and press no longer provides for a custodial sentence since 2004, but in this instance, prosecutors have considered that common law applies instead because these comments were made on a social media platform.

These recent arrests have taken place amidst mounting repression against journalists and civil society activists seeking to speak truth to power. Since president Faure Gnassingbé was reelected for a fourth term in February 2020, the authorities have increasingly crack downed on journalists and civil society activists through smear campaigns and legal harassment, in particular.

Sanctions against critical newspapers have increased since the start of the year in Togo. In March 2021, newspaper The Alternative faced a four-month suspension, following the decision of the Supreme Court to uphold an earlier suspension imposed in February by the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAAC) taken because of a complaint made by a minister about an article alleging, he had falsified documents.

In this context, we, the undersigned, urge the Togolese government to:

- Immediately release Ferdinand Ayité and Joel Egah and to lift the judicial supervision of Isidore Kouwonou;
- Ensure that civil society organisations, human rights defenders and political activists involved in promoting human rights can freely exercise their rights; and
- Refrain from taking any punitive measure against people organising or participating in peaceful protests

We also call on the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights to urge Togo to comply with its legal obligations under international and African human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Signed off by the following organisations:

1. AfricanDefenders (Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network)
2. Coalition des Défenseurs des Droits Humains du Benin (CDDH-BENIN)
3. Coalition Ivoirienne des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (CIDDH)
4. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
5. Réseau Nigérien des Défenseurs des Droits Humains (RNDDH)
6. Réseau Ouest Africain des Défenseurs des Droits Humains/West African Human Rights Defenders' Network (ROADDH/WAHRDN)
7. Togolese Civil League
8. Tournons La Page