

ARTICLE¹⁹

Strengthening civic space and promoting human rights in Mali

Towards a democratic society

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Towards a democratic society



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Executive summary

Mali stands at a critical juncture where human rights are threatened by a combination of political, security, and institutional factors. The prolonged military transition, jihadist attacks, and counterterrorism operations marred by abuses have created a climate of widespread insecurity. This is accompanied by an alarming contraction of civic space through the dissolution of political parties, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and mounting pressure on the media and dissenting voices.

ABDUCTIONS AND ARRESTS

At the same time, violations of fundamental rights, including extrajudicial executions, exacerbate the vulnerability of populations, particularly human rights defenders, journalists, and activists.

Between February and August 2025, Mali's persistent security crisis continued to undermine the protection of civic space and fundamental rights. This period was marked by drastic measures, notably the [dissolution of all political parties and organisations by presidential decree](#), significantly reducing democratic participation. During this time, we documented cases of abductions of human rights defenders and arrests of journalists, illustrating the severity of threats to freedom of expression and the safety of civic actors.

These violations weaken civil society and deepen the rollback of public freedoms in a context where political and security stability remains

precarious. International indicators confirm this regression, notably the [Global Expression Report 2025](#):

- Mali's **freedom of expression score has decreased by 18 points to 38 out of 100** since 2022 and is considered **highly restricted**.
- Mali now **ranks 98th out of 161 countries**, dropping 18 places within 3 years.

Reporters Without Borders also observed a [deterioration in press freedom](#) in 2025: Mali's World Press Freedom Ranking fell 5 places to 119th and its score decreased to 48.23 out of 100.

RAISING AWARENESS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Compiled as part of the EU-funded 'Strengthening Civic Space and Promoting Human Rights in Mali' project, this briefing aims to inform and raise awareness among authorities, civil society, and partners about the state of human rights and civic space in Mali. We assess the effectiveness of protection policies and support collective advocacy for a democratic environment aligned with national, regional, and international standards. By documenting violations, analysing trends, and highlighting positive measures, we hope to restore fundamental freedoms and consolidate citizen participation in Mali.

Analysing cases against national, regional, and international standards

VIOLATION OF POLITICAL PLURALISM – DISSOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES

On 13 May 2025, the Malian authorities dissolved all political parties and organisations of a political nature through [Article 1 of Decree No. 2025-0339](#), citing reasons of ‘political reform’ and ‘public security’, and invoking the need to redefine the legal framework of political life to make it more ‘serene and harmonious’. The dissolution also aimed to implement [recommendations from the National Refoundation Conference](#) of 2021, with the stated objective of streamlining Mali’s political landscape, which is deemed excessively fragmented and destabilising.

This decision followed the adoption of [Law No. 2025-005](#) of 13 May 2025, which repealed the [Charter of Political Parties](#) (18 August 2005) and [Law No. 2015-007](#) (4 March 2015) on the Status of the Political Opposition.

The dissolution occurred amidst a tense political climate. Earlier in April, a coalition of more than 100 parties and civil society organisations had [demanded an end to the military transition](#) by 31 December 2025. A demonstration on 4 May in Bamako had already denounced the imminent threat of such a decision, perceived as an attempt to stifle political debate.

As early as April 2024, [Mali’s transitional authorities had suspended](#) ‘until further notice’ the activities of political parties and associations nationwide, citing ‘political and security reasons’.

The dissolution of all political parties and political organisations in Mali constitutes a [serious infringement](#) of several fundamental rights, including freedoms of expression, association, and assembly guaranteed under Malian law and international human rights law.

Taken without written justification or judicial oversight, the decision fails to meet any of the criteria required under international law: legality, legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality.

Unlike democratic practices in other countries, where the dissolution of a party is strictly regulated by law and subject to a reasoned judicial decision, Mali opted for a blanket and indefinite ban, depriving its citizens of any right to public participation.

The absence of clear grounds, the excessive scope of the decree, and the lack of judicial procedure reveal a political intent to lock down civic space rather than protect public order.

This demonstrates that the dissolution is arbitrary, disproportionate, and incompatible with Mali’s obligations under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR) and the [African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights](#) (African Charter).

ARTICLE 19 provides an in-depth [legal analysis](#) of the implications of this dissolution and how it violates Malian law and international human rights law.

We call for immediate revision and restoration of democratic safeguards.

Facing the dissolution of political parties, the Collective of Parties for the Constitution – a group comprising around 100 formations and movements – [filed a lawsuit](#) seeking to annul the presidential decree suspending their activities. This legal action offered the Malian judiciary an opportunity to restore legality and demonstrate the government’s commitment to fundamental human rights principles enshrined in the [African Charter](#).

Regional jurisprudence is clear: the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the African Commission have consistently condemned disproportionate restrictions on political participation. In [Tanganyika Law Society & Others v. Tanzania \(2011\)](#), the Court affirmed that arbitrary dissolution violates the right to participation guaranteed under the ICCPR. Similarly, in [Interights and Others v. Mauritania](#), the Court [held that dissolution on security grounds was excessive](#) and that targeted measures could suffice.

The Malian judiciary has so far sent positive signals. In an [interim ruling](#) widely reported by the media, the District Court of Bamako, Commune I, ordered on 25 August 2025 a stay of proceedings regarding the dissolution of political parties, pending a definitive review of the constitutional challenge

raised. The case was referred to the Constitutional Court via the Supreme Court, in accordance with [Article 153\(1\) of the Constitution](#) of 22 July 2023.

This referral gives the Constitutional Court an opportunity to reaffirm its role as guardian of constitutionality for the protection of fundamental freedoms and republican legality. Ultimately, if the judiciary upholds political pluralism as enshrined in the country’s constitution and African norms, the Malian Government, with its strong commitment to Pan-Africanism, would emerge stronger.

Given the importance of an open civic space and political pluralism, lifting the current political restrictions would ensure compliance with regional and international human rights standards and restore trust and stability in the political arena. These conditions are essential for achieving governance objectives. Therefore, the authorities should:

- **Annul Decree No. 2025-0339** of 13 May 2025 dissolving political parties and organisations in the Republic of Mali.
- **Restore the laws governing political parties/organisations** and the status of the political opposition by repealing the law that abrogated them.
- **Respect legal obligations regarding pluralistic politics and civil society**, notably by guaranteeing the free operation of political associations, free from state interference except as provided by law and in conformity

with African and international human rights standards, particularly Articles 19, 21, 22, and 25 of the [ICCPR](#) and Articles 10, 13, and 17 of the [African Charter](#).

- **Ensure that any limitation** imposed on the functioning of political parties and associations **meets the criteria of legality, pursuit of a legitimate aim, and proportionality**.
- **Promote and maintain ongoing peaceful dialogue**, trust among political actors, and the strengthening of peace and social cohesion, and **encourage collaborative solutions** to multiple challenges, including security, public order, and civic and political education for citizens.
- The Constitutional Court should **render a decision that protects political pluralism**, an essential element of democracy and human rights, by suspending the application of the decree dissolving political parties pending its constitutional review.

Arbitrary detentions, abductions, and other attacks

[Arbitrary detention](#) constitutes a serious violation of the right to liberty, as defined by Article 9 of the [ICCPR](#). It is characterised by unlawful arrest, lack of information on the grounds for detention, non-compliance with procedural safeguards, and failure to present the detainee promptly before a judge.

The [International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance](#) (ICPPED), ratified by Mali, obliges states to prevent such practices, investigate them, and guarantee effective remedies for victims.

ABDUCTION OF BADARA ALOU SACKO, CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVIST

Badara Alou Sacko, a prominent figure in Malian civil society, member of the Forum of Civil Society Organizations and spokesperson for the movement Ne Touche Pas à Mon Argent (Don't Touch My Money), was [abducted](#) on 14 March 2025 in Bamako by unidentified individuals.

According to Avocats Sans Frontières and Fédération Internationale pour les Droits Humains (FIDH), 3 armed, hooded men in civilian clothes followed Sacko and pulled him from his car in downtown Bamako near the Ministry of National Education. He was then forced into a Toyota car with tinted windows and no licence plates and taken to an unknown destination.

No one claimed responsibility for the act or its motives. However, it is believed that his abduction was [linked to his denunciation of ‘unfulfilled promises by the military’](#), such as the failure to respect the transition timeline and recent taxes imposed to replenish state funds.

[According to FIDH](#), Sacko’s relatives filed a missing person report with the police. The police pledged to investigate, but they made no progress until after his release. After more than 2 months of disappearance, Sacko was released during the night of 23–24 May. The Ne Touche Pas à Mon Argent movement [announced his release](#), but the **authorities made no statement regarding his disappearance or release**.

Although the perpetrators remain unidentified and no group claimed responsibility, the case bears similarities to previous incidents involving individuals linked to state security services. According to the L’Observatoire pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme et de la Démocratie au Mali (Observatory for the Defence of Human Rights and Democracy in Mali) and [cited by FIDH](#), the methods used in Sacko’s abduction indicate involvement by the National State Security Agency, which has been implicated in the abduction of 10 other human rights defenders and dissenting voices. In each case, the **authorities did not investigate**.

[According to media reports](#), another member of the Ne Touche Pas à Mon Argent’ movement, Mamadou Sidibé, narrowly escaped an attempted abduction on 25 March 2025, thanks to

the intervention of local residents. This reinforces the perception of pressure on members of the movement and critical voices.

ABDUCTION AND DISAPPEARANCE OF POLITICAL ACTIVIST AND JOURNALIST EL BACHIR THIAM

El Bachir Thiam, a political activist and journalist affiliated with the Yelema political party, which was dissolved in 2024, was abducted on 8 May 2025 in Kati, near Bamako. He remained missing until his release more than 4 months later. Known for criticising the Malian Government and advocating for a return to constitutional order, Thiam [denounced](#) what he called ‘the endless transition’ on 7 May 2025, the day before his abduction.

Thiam’s detention was kept secret. His family was denied access to him and they were not informed of his location. Despite persistent calls for Thiam’s release, the **authorities did not initiate an investigation to locate him**.

In a [statement](#) on 9 September 2025, UN human rights experts on Mali demanded the immediate and unconditional release of Thiam, describing his enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity and a flagrant violation of Mali’s international obligations. They also called for an end to the repression of civil society, human rights defenders, and perceived opponents.

Thiam was finally released on 25 September 2025, after more than 4 months of enforced disappearance. Information about his disappearance and release appeared [in the press](#). The

Malian authorities made no official communication regarding his secret detention or release. No group has claimed responsibility for the act.

ABDUCTION AND EXECUTION OF SIDI BARKA, PRESIDENT OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF MÉNAKA

On 19 May 2025, unidentified armed individuals abducted Sidi Barka, president of the Civil Society of Ménaka and a staunch human rights defender. Barka was on his way home from the mosque when he was attacked by 2 men on motorcycles who were waiting near his house. After intimidating him and preventing his escape by firing shots into the air, the [assailants forcibly took him away](#).

Following his abduction and 94 days in captivity, [Barka was executed](#) on 20 August 2025, along with other individuals, including Ahmadou Ag Mahamad, a Tuareg herder, 2 Arab citizens, a musician, and other residents of the region.

After the execution and burial, the perpetrators shared the geolocation of the burial site with one of Barka's relatives. According to the [media](#), the methods used in the execution suggested that the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara was behind this heinous crime.

ARREST AND DETENTION OF JOURNALIST ALFOUSSEYNI TOGO

On 9 April 2025, Alfousseyni Togo, editor-in-chief of *Le Canard de la Venise*, was arrested in Bamako following the publication of a critical article about the Malian judiciary entitled [Malian Justice or the Evil of the Century](#). In the article, he denounced corruption, systemic failures, and the instrumentalisation of justice by the executive.

Togo challenged a statement by Justice Minister Mamoudou Kassougué who claimed that public confidence in the Malian judiciary had risen from 30% to 70% in 2024. He was charged by the Cybercrime Unit with 'undermining the credit of the state, insults via an information system, and defamation'.

Undermining the credit of the state is provided for under [Article 242-1 of the 2024 Penal Code](#):

'Any statement or act likely to establish or provoke racial or ethnic discrimination, any statement or act intended to incite or maintain regionalist propaganda, any dissemination of news tending to undermine national unity or the credit of the state, any manifestation contrary to freedom of conscience and freedom of worship likely to set citizens against each other, shall be punishable by five years' imprisonment and a ten-year ban on residence.'

Insults via an information system are provided for under [Article 512-18 of the 2024 Penal Code](#):

‘Anyone who utters an insult via an information system against a person shall be punishable by two years’ imprisonment and a fine of 10,000,000 CFA francs.’

Defamation is provided for under [Article 38 of Law No. 00-046](#) of 7 July 2000 on the Press Regime and Press Offenses:

‘Any allegation or imputation that harms the honour or reputation of a person or body to whom the act is attributed constitutes defamation. The direct publication or reproduction of such allegation or imputation is punishable even if expressed in a doubtful form or aimed at a person or body not expressly named but identifiable through the terms used. Any offensive expression, term of contempt, or insult that does not contain the imputation of any fact constitutes an insult.’

After 34 days in detention, Togo was released on 12 May upon payment of a CFA 500,000 bail; however, the charges were not dropped. His [trial was held on 29 July 2025](#), and he [was sentenced](#) to eight months’ suspended imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 CFA francs for undermining the credit of the state.

Violation of human rights laws

Despite Malian law and international standards explicitly prohibiting abductions, arrests, and arbitrary detentions, these practices continue. There are serious concerns about respect for individual freedoms and civic space, as well as the protection of life, security, and personal integrity – particularly for human rights defenders and civil society activists in Mali. These crimes create a **climate of fear and impunity**, discouraging political participation and the exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

The abductions and enforced disappearances of Sacko, Thiam, Togo, and Barka, and the execution of Barka and others with him, constitute serious crimes and grave violations of fundamental rights. These actions are in flagrant breach of the Malian Constitution, domestic laws, and Mali’s regional and international legal human rights obligations:

- The [2023 Malian Constitution](#) guarantees the rights to liberty, security, equality, freedom of thought, and the prohibition of inhuman treatment. Article 2 states that: ‘The human person is sacred and inviolable. Every individual has the right to life, liberty, security, and the integrity of his person.’
- [Articles 2, 4, 14, and 15 of the Malian Constitution](#) enshrine the sanctity of the human person; the prohibition of torture, slavery, and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; and freedom of expression and of the press.

- [Articles 4 and 6 of the African Charter](#) guarantee protection against arbitrary deprivation of liberty, arrest, or detention: ‘Human beings are inviolable. Every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right.’
- [Articles 6, 7, 9, and 10 of the African Charter](#) also protect rights to liberty, security, fair trial, freedom of expression and association, and protection against arbitrary detention.
- [Article 9\(1\) of the ICCPR](#), to which Mali is a state party, prohibits arbitrary detention and guarantees the right to liberty and security of person. Articles 19 and 21 of the ICCPR guarantee freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly.
- [Article 1 of the ICPPED](#) states that: ‘No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war, threat of war, internal political instability, or any other public emergency, may be invoked to justify enforced disappearance.’
- [Articles 17 and 18 of the ICPPED](#) require that authorities or groups provide family members and all persons with a legitimate interest with information on the detainee’s whereabouts.

African and international standards establish that secret or incommunicado detention may amount to enforced disappearance when relatives or other persons with a legitimate interest

are denied access to information on the person’s whereabouts or are not allowed to verify the information provided.¹ Duration is not determinative: enforced disappearance may result from any unacknowledged deprivation of liberty that removes the person from the protection of the law, even for a limited time.

ARTICLE 19 stresses that enforced disappearance violates numerous rights, including the right to liberty and physical security, freedom of expression, and access to information – especially when the victim is a journalist. According to the UN Human Rights Council,² when state or non-state actors subject a person to enforced disappearance for exercising or promoting rights to information, freedom of opinion or expression, or freedom of association or assembly, this also violates the enjoyment of these rights.

The [Guidelines on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in Africa](#), adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, reinforce this position. The guidelines note that non-state actors often use enforced disappearances and secret detentions to repress and intimidate journalists, human rights defenders, and political activists who exercise their rights to

¹ See: [Article 66 of the African Charter; Principles and Guidelines on Human and Peoples’ Rights while Countering Terrorism in Africa](#), Part 3(D)(iii); Joint Study on Global Practices of Secret Detention in the Context of Countering Terrorism ([A/HRC/13/42](#), 19 February 2010, p. 22).

² [A/HRC/30/38/Add.5](#), 9 July 2015, para 36.

information, participation in public affairs, and freedom of assembly and/or association. These actions violate the rights guaranteed under [Article 6 of the African Charter](#) and related provisions on freedom of expression, access to information, association, and peaceful assembly. The guidelines explicitly state that **enforced disappearance is absolutely prohibited and that no exceptional circumstance may justify its violation**, reaffirming [Article 1 of the ICPPED](#).

Sacko and the other activists abducted and subjected to enforced disappearance were exercising their rights to freedom of expression and to inform, either individually or in association. Their abduction and enforced disappearance in response to these activities constitute a violation of their rights to liberty, security, and physical integrity – and, in some cases, life. It is also a direct infringement of these fundamental freedoms, preventing them and the public from continuing to exercise these rights. This deters critical voices and forces self-censorship out of fear of reprisals.

STATE OBLIGATIONS

All parties must honour the obligation under the [African Charter](#) to protect every person against any deprivation of liberty, arbitrary arrest, or detention, and also adhere to the [Principles and Guidelines on Human and Peoples' Rights while Countering Terrorism in Africa](#), which clearly prohibit any enforced disappearance or secret detention.

All states party to the [African Charter](#), including Mali, have an obligation

to protect human rights defenders, journalists, and activists against threats or reprisals of any kind, including enforced disappearances. Like other African states affected by terrorism, other security crises, and states of emergency, Mali must consistently take measures to prohibit secret detention and enforced disappearance.

When non-state actors commit such acts, the state has an obligation to investigate, shed light on the circumstances, and hold perpetrators accountable before the courts. In all circumstances, Mali, as a signatory to these agreements, is obliged to prevent, investigate, and punish any enforced disappearance or unlawful detention, including those committed in the context of counterterrorism or security crises by non-state actors.

Specific Malian laws clearly establish the state's responsibility to protect human rights defenders and to combat impunity for serious crimes such as arbitrary deprivation of liberty and abductions:

- [Articles 15 and 17 of Law No. 2018-003](#) of 12 January 2018 on human rights defenders provide that:

'The State must protect Human Rights Defenders, their family members, and collaborators when they face a situation of risk or danger in the exercise of their activities.'

'The State must ensure that violations committed against a Human Rights Defender are punished in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.'

- The [Malian Penal Code](#) states that:

'Anyone who, by fraud, violence, or threats, removes an individual from the place where he has been placed by those to whose authority he is subject or entrusted, shall be punished by twenty years' imprisonment and a ten-year ban on residence.' (Kidnapping of persons, Article 324-6 of Law No. 2024-027).

However, it must be noted that authorities have taken no measures to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of the abductions, enforced disappearances, and executions of certain victims, including those in this briefing.

- The [Malian Penal Code](#) further provides that:

'No one should be repressed for their opinion or civic engagement. These crimes must not go unpunished. Identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators would send a strong message to those who exploit the difficult security context to repress human rights defenders and other citizens – even to the point of violating their lives, physical integrity, and liberty.'

PROTECTING JOURNALISTIC FREEDOM

The conviction of journalist Togo constitutes a form of intimidation against the media through the judicialisation of critical speech, and undermines the rights guaranteed by the Malian Constitution, including [Articles 14 and 15](#), which safeguard

freedoms of opinion, expression, the press, and access to information.

These rights are also guaranteed by [Article 9 of the African Charter](#) on access to information and [Article 19 of the ICCPR](#) on freedom of expression. The right to know and the right to express oneself freely are interconnected. The [Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#) call for the repeal of criminal defamation and press offence laws, and emphasise the need to tolerate criticism of public affairs on freedom of expression.

The illegitimacy of using criminal defamation laws to maintain public order or protect other public interests is evident. Criminal defamation laws, especially the threat of imprisonment, have a profoundly chilling effect on freedom of expression and should be abolished. Civil sanctions may be applied to repair harm to reputation only when strictly necessary, as recommended by Principle 22 of the [Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa](#). ARTICLE 19 has also developed [Principles on Freedom of Expression and Protection of Reputation](#) to guide states wishing to reform their laws to comply with international human rights standards. Principle 4 on defamation states:

'All criminal defamation laws should be abolished and replaced, where necessary, by appropriate civil defamation laws. Measures should be taken in states where criminal defamation laws remain in force to progressively implement this principle.'

Recommendations

This briefing demonstrates how the authorities repressed freedom of expression and civic space by dissolving political parties and organisations throughout Mali. Added to this are pressures on the media from arrests, intimidation, enforced disappearances of journalists, and abductions of human rights defenders.

These crimes underscore the urgent need to strengthen security guarantees for those on the front lines of informing citizens, especially journalists, human rights defenders, and other activists who continue to pay a heavy price in Mali's challenging security context.

ARTICLE 19 urges the Malian Government to:

- **Refrain from committing enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests or detentions, and incommunicado detention against any person.**
- **Release all human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society members arrested or unlawfully detained** as a result of their work.
- **Conduct independent, impartial, and transparent investigations** into abductions, secret detentions, arbitrary disappearances, and executions in accordance with international human rights law, and prosecute those responsible regardless of status.
- **Guarantee victims of enforced disappearance and their families the right to truth** about the disappearance, as well as adequate reparations, including remedies, fair compensation, and medical and psychological support.
- **Ensure the protection of civil society members, journalists, and human rights defenders against all forms of attack** so they can carry out their work without fear.
- **Establish specialised investigative units trained in international human rights law and journalist safety** to guarantee the security of media actors so they can fulfil their duty to inform without fear.
- **Repeal laws that criminalise criticism of the state and its officials.**
- **Decriminalise defamation and press offences.**
- **End the abusive use of criminal legislation to prosecute** journalists and civil society members for their expression.
- **Take appropriate measures to end all forms of pressure (censorship, violence, arrest, abduction, intimidation) aimed at silencing critical voices.**
- **Respect media independence,** create favourable conditions for their operation, and guarantee the right of individuals to access information both in law and in practice.
- **Ensure that the bodies of executed persons are recovered, documented, protected, and returned to their families** so they can mourn and proceed with burial.