

A December to remember: Africa's dire press freedom record

The attempted kidnapping of Tshivis Tshivuadi in DRC; journalist Azori Gwanda still missing in Tanzania; Red Pepper journalists released in Uganda, and more in the IFEX roundup of free expression news from Africa.



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DRC's descent into chaos

December was an unforgiving month for free expression in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**.

It started with an attack on three journalists and a technician of *Radio Télévision Véritas* (RTV). On 29 November 2017, authorities beat and detained Johnny Kasongo, Jean Doudou Ndumba, Musiko Kisiesia and Ephraïm Mbayo at the RTV offices in Kabinda, Lomami province. Authorities stormed the building just as the journalists were transmitting a live broadcast of provincial assembly proceedings, [according to Journaliste en Danger \(JED\)](#).

The media workers were then transported in a government vehicle to the national intelligence service, l'Agence Nationale des Renseignements (ANR). The [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\) reports](#) that as of 1 December, the journalists were not charged, but Ndumba was released.

One week later, journalists in Kindu, Maniema province, were the victims of a similar attack. On 6 December, police officers [ransacked the offices of Radiotélévision Kindu Maniema \(RTKM\)](#) and arrested everyone on site. The raid took place during the transmission of *The people's word* - a call-in radio show - shortly after one of the callers accused deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Emmanuel Shadari of receiving bribes from the local governor. According to JED, the radio host refuted the caller's statements, but the Deputy Prime Minister still accused RTKM and its owner of attempting to tarnish his image.

The arrest of broadcast journalists became a clear trend with [the arrest of Benjamin Mutiya](#) on 14 December. Mutiya - a reporter for *Radio Télévision Communautaire de Walikale* (RTCWA) - was arrested by the national security service after being accused of defaming the administrator of Walikale, Marie-Claire Bangwene. Mutiya was held at Walikale central prison without charge, and his case was transferred to the prosecutor's office, according to CPJ and local rights group Carrefour pour la Justice, le Développement et les Droits Humains.

In a tweet published on 27 December, CPJ announced that Walikale had been released.

But Mutiya's release was far from an indication of an improvement of DRC's free expression landscape. On 29 December, armed men staged multiple attempts to kidnap Tshivis Tshivuadi, Secretary General of Journaliste en Danger (JED), from his home. JED is an IFEX member based in Kinshasa.

The attackers asked one of the security guards on the property about Tshivuadi's whereabouts, and beat him when he refused to divulge information. They also unsuccessfully tried to barge open Tshivuadi's door.

[In a statement, JED](#) condemned the attack and urged the Congolese security authorities to open a swift investigation in order to identify the perpetrators.

IFEX executive director Annie Game denounced the kidnapping attempt on Twitter.

“ *Members of [@IFEX](#) denounce the attack on the home of IFEX member Journalistes en Danger Secretary general Tshivis Tshivuadi in a kidnapping attempt in relation to the investigation into the disappearance of a journalist in Kindu for 3 weeks [#RDC](#)— Annie Game (@AnnieGame) [December 31, 2017](#)* ”

The attack on Tshivuadi's premises is a reflection of an increased climate of repression in the DRC.

Increased freedom of speech repression

On 30 December, authorities called for a nationwide shutdown of internet and SMS services, ahead of protests planned for the following day. The protests - organised by the Catholic Church - called for Kabila to step down, and new elections to be held, [according to Al Jazeera](#).

Presidential elections were scheduled to occur in November 2016, a month before Kabila's second consecutive presidential term was due to end. When Kabila refused to step down, an agreement was reached with the opposition that he would resign by the end of 2017. That did not occur, and, once again, elections were postponed until December 2018.

[Al Jazeera](#) reports that [at least seven people were killed in the DRC](#) on 31 December. Security forces reportedly fired live ammunition, tear gas and rubber bullets at demonstrators across the country.

[The Africa Freedom of Expression Exchange \(AFEX\) strongly condemned](#) the use of legal force against protestors and denounced "the increasing use of internet shutdowns by African governments to stifle expression and repress protests in contravention of provisions of national, regional and international frameworks."

East of the DRC, the free expression landscape was just as grim.

Targeted killings of journalists

On 11 December in **Somalia**, *Kalsan TV* journalist Mohamed Ibrahim Mohamed - also known as Gabow - died after an improvised explosive device went off on the car he was about to drive. [The National Union of Somali Journalists \(NUSOJ\) suspects](#) the attack was targeted. Mohamed was the fourth journalist to be killed in Somalia in 2017, and the third to die from a car bomb explosion. "With all the targeted killings of journalists that have happened in this country, no single investigation of a killed journalist is currently going on. This impunity for the killers of and culprits of violence against journalists only serves to fuel a cycle of killing," reads a statement by NUSOJ.

December was an equally dark month for the family of Mwananchi Communications [journalist Azori Gwanda](#) in **Tanzania**, who has been missing since 21 November. ARTICLE 19 reports that prior to his disappearance, Gwanda had written several articles on murders of local administrative officials, and police officers killed by motorcycle attackers.

"Azori Gwanda was reporting on issues of public concern and his disappearance may discourage other investigative journalists from reporting similar incidences due to fear of facing the same fate," stated Henry Maina, director of ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa, on 13 December.

Glimmer of hope

December did bring a glimmer of hope for some journalists, however.

On 28 December, **Somaliland** journalist [Abdirisak Dayib Ali was released](#) after spending 23 days in detention. Dayib Ali had been accused of publishing a false report on the news website *Gabiley News* earlier that month, according to CPJ. The report allegedly accused the city's mayor, Mahamed Omar, of criminal activity. The journalist said that he did not have anything to do with the report or the website.

In **Uganda**, eight staff members of *Red Pepper* tabloid newspaper were released after spending nearly a month in detention. The three editors and five directors had been detained over an article claiming Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni was plotting against his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, [according to Reporters without Borders \(RSF\)](#).

They were released on bail on 19 December for 20 million Ugandan Shillings each (approximately USD \$5,555). [HRNJ-Uganda welcomed their release](#), but criticised the fact that the journalists were detained in the first place.

"We are very happy for the release of our colleagues on bail after their long pre-trial detention by the State... Now that our colleagues are out, we have refocused our energies to ensuring the re-opening of the *Red Pepper* premises," said HRNJ-Uganda national coordinator Robert Ssempala.

Free expression defenders also breathed a sigh of relief upon the release of journalist Ahmed Abba from a prison in **Cameroon**.

“ On Dec 22, [#RFI](#) journo [#AhmedAbba](#), [@pressfreedom](#)'s 2017 [#IPFA](#) honoree, was freed from jail. [#Cameroon](#) [#FreeThePress](#)<https://t.co/ir7PBoKylJ>— CPJ Africa (@CPJAfrica) [December 24, 2017](#) ”

The Hausa-language correspondent for *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) [had been in detention](#) since July 2015, after he had reported on attacks by terrorist group Boko Haram. Following torture, isolation and a trial that was postponed 18 times, Abba was fined 85,000 Euros and [sentenced to 10 years in prison](#) on charges of "laundering the proceeds of a terrorist act."

But on 21 December, a military appeal court in Yaoundé reduced his jail sentence on terrorism charges from 10 years to 24 months; quashing his conviction on the first charge but upholding the second one. Since Abba had already served 29 months in prison, he was released shortly thereafter, on 23 December.

[Clea Kahn-Sriber, Head of RSF's Africa Desk, commented](#) on Abba's release: "Nothing can compensate the lost years in prison but we are relieved to know that Ahmed Abba will soon be reunited with his family."

Abba's case was not the only one being closely watched by free expression defenders last month.

On 6 December, Cameroonian-American [academic and journalist Patrice Nganang was arrested](#) as he attempted to fly to Zimbabwe from Cameroon. His lawyer told CPJ that Nganang was being held in Yaoundé on accusations of offending President Paul Biya in a Facebook post.

The press freedom organisation noted that the day prior to his detention, Nganang had published a column in *Jeune Afrique* - a French publication - criticising Biya's response to ongoing unrest in Cameroon's anglophone regions.

Over the past year, the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country have been [protesting the dominance of the French-speaking government](#), with some activists calling for independence of the anglophone region. Authorities have responded to protests with lethal force, and have also disrupted internet access in the regions for prolonged periods of time.

[CPJ Africa Program Coordinator Angela Quintal referred to Nganang's detention as "an outrage"](#), and noted that "Cameroon seems intent on violating the right to freedom of expression to silence critical voices, including in the press."

After pleading not guilty on charges of threatening President Biya, [Nganang was released on 27 December](#), according to AFP.

“ No justice today for [@ShawkanZeid](#) & not released on health grounds, new hearing Jan 13 [#FreeShawkan #Egypt pic.twitter.com/KRX5qHoCup](#)— Pressbehindbars (@FreeEgyptPress) [January 2, 2018](#) ”

Women charged with "indecent" in Sudan

For some people, the consequences of wearing the "wrong" outfit don't go beyond getting disapproving looks by judgmental onlookers. But for women in **Sudan**, dressing in certain clothing could result in lashes, fines, and even jail time.

On 10 December 2017, Sudanese authorities detained and charged 24 women in Khartoum with "indecent" for wearing trousers to a private party, even though the women had obtained a permit from the authorities.

The women were charged under Article 152 of the Criminal Code, which encompasses "indecent acts" in public, wearing an "obscene outfit" or "causing an annoyance to public feelings", [according to BBC News](#).

The charges were subsequently dropped, but authorities were quick to single out another culprit: journalist Wini Omer. Omer was arrested on 10 December after having attended the trial of the 24 women as a show of solidarity. But the charges against her were also dropped on 21 December, after a Khartoum state judge ruled that security agents had intended to target Omer.

[According to the Sudan Tribune](#), Omer commented on the verdict on her Facebook page, where she stated: "I am sad that I'm in a country that prosecutes us by law and accuses us of what it calls indecent and obscene clothing. I am sad that hundreds of women are convicted on a daily basis with this article and the dignity of women and men in Sudan is constantly humiliated under the pretext of maintaining public order."

In brief

In **Guinea**, the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (l'Agence Régulation des Postes et Télécommunications) [cut off the signals of private radio stations](#) *Sabari FM*, *Gangan FM*, *Djigui FM* and *Evasion FM* on 11 December. Officials said they had done so because the stations have not paid their license fees. But the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has reason to believe there is more at play than license fees, [given the increased repression of free expression](#) in the West African country as of late.

In **Ghana**, thugs [stormed Radio Justice's studios](#) in Tamale on 2 December, and assaulted the programme presenter and his three panelists. The attack occurred in the midst of a live broadcast. Later in the month, journalists from *Ghanaweb.com*, *Citi FM*, and *TV3* were attacked while covering a demonstration by supporters of the New Patriotic Party in Accra, [according to MFWA](#).

In **Sudan**, opposition newspapers *Al-Tayar*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Jarida*, and *Akhir Lahza* were confiscated from the printers by the intelligence services over a period of nine days.

[Al-Tayar's managing editor told CPJ](#) that the newspaper confiscations could be connected to *Al-Tayar's* critical coverage of President Omar al-Bashir's [visit to Russia](#) in November, [where he discussed](#) the possibility of military cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

IFEX member highlights

In Juba, **South Sudan**, stakeholders [gathered to attend a one-day dialogue on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) on 11 December 2017. The event was organised by the African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX) and the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS) as part of activities to commemorate the 2017 International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists (IDEI).

In **Nigeria**, Media Rights Agenda executive director Edetaen Ojo received the 2017 Lifetime Award for Journalistic Excellence of the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism (WSCIJ). The award ceremony was held on 9 December in Lagos.

On 20 December, media groups met with Zimbabwe Republic Police representatives in Harare to discuss actions that can secure a safe and conducive working environment for journalists. The meeting was [brokered by the Media Institute of Southern Africa \(MISA\) -Zimbabwe](#).

Source: [IFEX](#).

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