

Opinion

The duty to free Ignace Sossou

Freedom of the press is one of the most important pillars of democracy, and any democratic society that imprisons its journalists just for doing their job risks demeaning itself.

Ignace Sossou, a Beninese journalist who is head of production at *Bénin Web TV*, is currently serving an 18-month jail term to which he was sentenced on 24 December 2019 on a charge of “harassment by means of electronic communications” under a Beninese law regulating digital matters. He was prosecuted because he reported on social media some of the statements that the Cotonou prosecutor-general made during a workshop organized by the French media development agency CFI.

Anyone can now verify from the audio recording and transcript that the imprisoned journalist reported the statements accurately. How can you jail a journalist for three tweets that were “not in any way defamatory,” as the CFI finally acknowledged and everyone can confirm for themselves? In a country where the advent of the 2018 digital law has been as source of concern for the press and for online news and information providers, the statements made by the prosecutor were news. By reporting them, Sossou was just doing his job.

This is the first time that a journalist in an ECOWAS member country has been imprisoned for using social media to correctly report comments made in public. As Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has said, this “precedent is extremely dangerous.” The shockwaves from this journalist’s detention have been felt far beyond Benin’s borders. Throughout the world, including in other West African countries, laws passed in the name of combatting disinformation, hate messages, cybercrime and terrorism can be used to restrict free speech and imprison journalists. Ignace Sossou did nothing wrong as a journalist. But these three tweets have been treated as cyber-harassment. This journalist has been punished under a law, the digital law, which is not the law that is intended to regulate media activity.

His imprisonment does no credit to Benin, one of Africa’s most stable democracies, one that courageously decriminalized press offences, nor to the current government, although it spearheaded the decriminalization of press offences and, during the UN General Assembly, supported the Information and Democracy Initiative launched by RSF in November 2018.

More than two months after his arrest, and now that the proof of his innocence is publicly available, every day that Ignace Sossou continues to spend in prison is prejudicial to Benin’s democratic reputation and to the record of President Patrice Talon, whose determination to combat disinformation, especially on social networks, we share. This is an issue for all the world’s countries. We are convinced that it can be addressed without restricting freedom of information.

President Talon's government has a duty to honour the decision by Benin's parliament in 2015 to decriminalize press offences. He will show himself worthy of this decision by using all of the powers available to him as president to free this journalist, whose imprisonment is one of the worst judicial and political errors of these years of democratic renewal in Benin and a major setback in the fight by journalists throughout the region, from Dakar to Cotonou, to ensure that media personnel are no longer jailed for ordinary press offences.