



JOINT STATEMENT

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Delivered by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), in partnership with AfricTivistes

Honourable Chairperson, Honourable Commissioners, distinguished representatives, ladies and gentlemen.

I deliver this statement on behalf of the West Africa Civil Society Institute and our partner, AfricTivistes.

We welcome the Commission's continued attention to civic space and the protection of human rights defenders, particularly Resolution 667, adopted at the 88th Ordinary Session, which calls for an Africa-wide study on strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs.

Across West Africa, human rights defenders, journalists, community organisers and peaceful protesters face arrests, prosecution and administrative restrictions for exercising their fundamental rights. Broadly worded laws on defamation, cybercrime, false information and national security are increasingly used to restrict legitimate expression and peaceful organising.

The concern is not only whether someone is convicted. The legal process itself is a punishment. Prolonged proceedings, legal costs and threats of imprisonment often exhaust the defenders and their organisations, discourage public participation and force advocates to abandon their work. This is the judicialisation of civic space: using legal or administrative processes to intimidate and silence legitimate civic action.

Developments across West Africa illustrate the urgency. In April 2026, Burkina Faso announced the dissolution of 118 civil society organisations, including human rights

groups. In Guinea, an appeals court upheld opposition leader Aliou Bah's two-year sentence for insulting and defaming the transitional president. In Niger, restrictions on political parties and online expression have narrowed public participation. In Togo, protest-related arrests and digital access disruptions have raised concerns. In Nigeria, cybercrime prosecutions and a N100 million civil claim against SERAP illustrate the potential cost of engaging in public participation and demanding accountability.

Across the Sahel, defenders and journalists also face surveillance, threats, enforced disappearance and pressure on their families. Women human rights defenders face additional risks, including sexualised online abuse, harassment and attacks on their reputations and private lives. These threats can force women out of public debate and leave violations undocumented.

We recognise States' responsibility to protect their populations from terrorism and violent extremism. However, national security cannot justify arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance or the criminalisation of peaceful dissent.

We therefore urge States to take five practical steps:

- 1.** Reform restrictive laws that criminalise legitimate expression, association and peaceful assembly.
- 2.** End arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, and investigate allegations of torture and ill-treatment.
- 3.** Protect judicial independence and fair-trial rights, including access to legal counsel and safeguards against abusive litigation.
- 4.** Prevent arbitrary suspension or dissolution of civil society organisations and ensure that regulatory decisions are transparent and subject to independent review.
- 5.** Strengthen protection for civic space frontliners, human rights defenders, including legal aid, safe reporting channels and responses to digital attacks and cross-border reprisals, with particular attention to the risks facing women defenders.

We also call on the African Commission to implement Resolution 667 through a consultative study that examines not only Strategic litigation against public participation - SLAPP cases, but also legal costs, self-censorship and the withdrawal of defenders from public advocacy.

The Commission's monitoring and protection mechanisms should address the specific challenges facing defenders in the Sahel, women human rights defenders and those exposed to digital and cross-border threats.

Honourable Chairperson and Commissioners,

The voices of those who bring evidence of human rights violations before African mechanisms must be heard, not punished. The law should protect those who defend rights, not become another instrument for silencing them.

Civic space is not a privilege granted by governments. It is protected by the African Charter and is essential to accountability, public participation and the realisation of human rights.

Thank you.