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Africa - Benin

Prickly president

Court verdict raises concern about freedom of information in Benin

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The publisher of the newspaper *L'Indépendant* has been given a three-year suspended prison sentence for "insulting" the president of Benin, his newspaper has been suspended for a total of six months and one of his journalists has been jailed for two months. Where is Benin heading?

Benin is relatively highly placed at 75th of 180 countries in the [Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index](#), and is ranked 16th among African countries. The suspended sentence was handed down by a Cotonou court two days ago against *L'Indépendant* publisher **John Akintola**, who also received a fine of 200,000 CFA francs (300 euros) for an article alleged to have insulted President Thomas Boni Yayi. At the same time, the court ordered the newspaper to be suspended for three months from 16 July, and the writer of the article, **Prudence Tessi**, received a two-month prison sentence. The article at issue alleged that trips abroad by President Yayi had been illegally financed by the Benin Electric Energy Company (SBEE).

The general director of SBEE, Marius Hounkpatin, was dismissed as a result of the case and has now left the country. He had brought an earlier case against the newspaper, which was suspended for three months in April. This suspension had been due to expire on 15 July.

Questioned by RWB, Akintola expressed his anger. "Journalists are being stifled, the press is gagged and we no longer have the right to criticise or do our work," he said. "In order to keep going, we have to be part of the government's propaganda machine. Four hundred trials against the media are currently in progress in Benin".

Commenting on the verdict, Cléa Kahn-Sriber, head of the Reporters Without Borders Africa desk, said: "These heavy sentences are designed to discourage investigative journalists from working in Benin. They confirm the urgent need to scrap custodial sentences for press crimes in Benin, which pose a threat to the Beninese people's right to know.

"The head of state claims to be 'insulted', but he has taken action on the basis of revelations made by journalists. Are they really guilty of defamation, or of revealing an inconvenient truth?"

The latest sentences follow the arrest of the journalist **François Yovo**, publisher of the newspaper *Libération*, last month. He was taken to Cotonou prison to serve a three-month sentence for defamation imposed last November. His newspaper had published corruption allegations against the head of a state company.
