

URGENT ACTION

JOURNALIST STILL ARBITRARILY DETAINED

On 19 May, the Cotonou Court of Appeal reduced the sentence against investigative journalist, Ignace Sossou, to 12 months in prison, including six months suspended. He was first sentenced to 18 months in prison and fined for “harassment” on 24 December 2019 for tweets quoting the Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency CFI. He is due to be released on 24 June. Ignace Sossou is being arbitrarily detained and must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin

Palais de la Marina

Cotonou

Benin

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Your Excellency,

*I welcome the Appeals Court decision of 19 May to reduce the sentence against investigative journalist **Ignace Sossou** to 12 months, including six months suspended sentence. However, I am deeply concerned about his continued arbitrary detention simply for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.*

On 18 December 2019, Ignace Sossou posted tweets quoting the Public Prosecutor during a conference hosted by the French media development agency CFI. In his tweets, Ignace Sossou questioned the government’s decision to shut down the Internet during elections in April 2019 and stated that the Public Prosecutor had described Benin’s digital code as “a weapon” that can be used against journalists. The Public Prosecutor alleged that his remarks had been taken out of context by Ignace Sossou and issued a complaint against him at the Court of First Instance in Cotonou. On 24 December, Ignace Sossou appeared before a judge. He acknowledged having written the tweets but not to having harassed the Public Prosecutor. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison and received a fine.

I am concerned about the repressive climate and undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression in Benin. The authorities must respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights of journalists, bloggers, activists and human rights defenders, in accordance with the country’s international human rights obligations.

In view of the above, I urge you to ensure:

- ***The immediate and unconditional release of Ignace Sossou; who is arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression;***
- ***The amendment of Law No. 2017-20 of 20 April 2018 on the Digital Code to bring it into conformity with international standards on the right to freedom of expression, particularly by decriminalising the publication of false information and online press offences.***

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In Benin, at least 17 journalists, bloggers and political activists have been prosecuted in less than two years under the 2018 Digital Law. Some of the repressive provisions of this law undermine the right to freedom of expression, including press freedom in the country.

The CFI initially refused to back Ignace Sossou after his detention. In a letter dated 19 December 2019 and sent to the Beninese Minister of Justice, the Africa director of CFI declared that "the truncated sentences and taken out of their context absolutely do not represent the content of the exchanges that we had during the debate. We are sorry that an unscrupulous journalist took advantage of this privileged moment to try to make a buzz at the expense of the Prosecutor". After declaring that it "distances itself from publications and from these types of practices which are unethical and give a bad name to the profession as a whole". However, CFI has publicly presented on 8 January 2020 "an apology for the unfolding of the events in which he [Ignace Sossou] was a victim".

Ignace Sossou has been prosecuted for his journalistic work and for exercising his right to freedom of expression in the past. In August 2019, he was falsely accused of publishing "false information" in connection with two articles on tax evasion in Benin. The Cotonou First Class Court of First Instance found him guilty of defamation and handed him a suspended sentence of one month and a fine of 500,000 FCFA.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: French, English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 24 June 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Ignace Sossou (He/his)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR14/1769/2020/en/