

URGENT ACTION

ARBITRARILY DETAINED AUTHOR MUST BE RELEASED

On 20 May, Etienne Fakaba Sissoko, a Malian economist and university professor, was convicted on charges of defamation, damaging the state's reputation and distributing fake news. He was sentenced to two years in jail, with one year suspended, and a fine of XOF 3 million (approximately 4,500 Euros). A notable government critic, Etienne Fakaba Sissoko was arrested on 25 March after the publication of a book in which he denounced alleged propaganda in the Malian government's public information campaign. His arbitrary detention is in violation of his right to freedom of expression. He must be immediately and unconditionally released.

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

Mr Mahamadou Kassogué
Minister of Justice and Human rights
Cite administrative – batiment 12
BP 97 Bamako, Mali
Email: mamoudoukassogue@gmail.com

Dear Minister,

I am concerned about the arbitrary detention and unlawful conviction of Professor **Étienne Fakaba Sissoko** to two years in jail, one of which was suspended.

On 25 March, the Judicial Investigation Brigade arrested Étienne Fakaba Sissoko, a university professor, economist, activist and author, at his home in Bamako. Two days later, on 27 March, he was charged with "harming the reputation of the state", "defamation" and "dissemination of false news disturbing the public peace". The charges are related to his book, "Propaganda, Agitation and Harassment – government communication during the transition in Mali", published in December 2023, in which he was critical of Mali's military authorities. During his trial on 6 May, Etienne Sissoko defended his work based, according to him, on factual evidence and expert analysis. The prosecutor from the anti-cybercrime unit allegedly criticized the tone used in the book. On 20 May, a court in Bamako sentenced Professor Etienne Fakaba Sissoko to two years in prison, with one year suspended and a fine of XOF 3 million (approximately 4,500 Euros).

Amnesty International believes Etienne Sissoko was sentenced solely because of his activism and criticism, in violation of his rights to freedom of expression. Arrest or detention as punishment for the peaceful exercise of human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, is arbitrary and violates the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, both of which Mali is a state party to. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has determined that those detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights must be immediately released.

In light of the above, I call upon you to ensure the Malian authorities immediately and unconditionally release Étienne Fakaba Sissoko and quash his conviction. Pending his release, I urge you to ensure that he has access to his lawyers and family.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Over the past years, the shrinking of civic space in Mali has been characterized by violations of freedom of expression, including press freedom and the right to information, as well as freedom of association. Mali has been governed since 2021 by military officers who took control from the democratically elected government of President Keita in 2020 following protests, and then removed the civilian transitional authorities from power in May 2021, following disagreements.

Freedom of expression is threatened by Law N°2019-056 pertaining to punishment of cybercrime. Articles 20 and 21 of this law punish the authors of "threats" or insults" (without the elements constituting these offences being defined) to sentences going from 6 months to 10 years of imprisonment, and/or fines from one to XOF 10 million. Opposition leaders, activists and human rights defenders who publicly expressed their disagreement with the decisions taken by the transitional authorities have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, and prosecuted since 2022.

This is not the first time Professor Etienne Fakaba Sissoko has been targeted by the authorities. On 16 January 2022, he was arrested by the prosecutorial office of the District Court of Commune 4 of Bamako for comments tending toward "stigmatization or regionalist, ethnic or religious discrimination with the aim of pitting citizens against each other using ICTs," after he spoke on TV about the impact of ECOWAS sanctions in Mali. He was provisionally released in June 2022, and forbidden from leaving the country.

In January 2023, Aminata Dicko, a human rights defender, was forced into exile after denouncing abuses by the armed forces in a briefing to the UN Security Council, following which the gendarmerie summoned her for questioning in connection with allegations of high treason and defamation.

On 10 April 2024, the Council of Ministers issued a decree suspending the activities of political parties and associations" until further notice. A day after, Mali's high authority for communication issued a notice announcing a ban on reporting and broadcasting activities of political parties or association.

Since February 2024, at least three organisations have been dissolved including the Pupils and Students' Association of Mali.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: French

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 26 July 2024

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

NAME AND PRONOUN: Etienne Fakaba Sissoko (he/his)