

## Guinea-Bissau & Environmental and Land Rights Defenders

By Anna Isernia

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in West Africa face serious threats both from government forces and non-State actors, such as corporations, organized crime groups, and others. Despite being protected by the 1998 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, HRDs in Guinea Bissau still find themselves under threat. As the Green Advocates International *Final Baseline Report on West Africa's Frontline Grassroots Environmental and Human Rights Defenders* demonstrates, although the constitution of Guinea-Bissau provides for freedom of expression, information, and assembly, HRDs are not explicitly protected. Furthermore, these rights are expressly limited within the Constitution. Key areas of focus for human rights defenders are gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation and forced marriage, freedom of the press and expression, civil and political rights, workers' rights, healthcare, and religious freedom.

Thanks to the rampant corruption following political upheaval from 2012 onwards, the Guinean police force offers little protection. In fact, the opposite is true. In 2019, police violated the people's right to assembly and expression when they violently disbanded a student march. Several months later, a protester was killed when demonstrating for a new voter registration process.

On the positive side, Guinean police sometimes allow rallies to proceed peacefully. Similarly positively, although Guinea-Bissau has no human rights institutions, it is one of the few countries in West Africa where HRDs are not referred to as traitors, anti-development, anti-government, anti-investment, or anti-country actors.

Nonetheless, HRDs are still being extrajudicially killed, and routinely have their human rights violated. Women human rights defenders, in particular, have encountered violence from community members while carrying out their work.

So what can Guinea-Bissau do to protect its HRDs? The Green Advocates International Report provides some ideas. For one, Guinea-Bissau should bring its National Human Rights Commission into compliance with the Paris Principles, the internationally agreed upon benchmarks for national human rights institutions. Furthermore, the Guinean government must take steps to address corruption in the police force and hold accountable police officers who commit human rights abuses against HRDs. One way of doing this is by enforcing the rights already codified in its constitution. Finally, by providing an overall more transparent access to governmental information, the Guinean government could provide accountability as a barrier to corruption.

Beyond recommendations in the Green Advocates International Report, Guinea-Bissau could take even further steps, like ratifying the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention

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against Torture. Finally, the Guinean government should consider easing restrictions on rights embedded within the Constitution.