

Patrice Talon, President of the Republic of Benin
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Your Excellency,

I am concerned about the sentence passed on investigative journalist Ignace Sossou, for “harassment through electronic communication”. 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, he stated that the Public Prosecutor had described Benin’s digital code as “a weapon” that can be used against journalists and questioned the government’s decision to shut down the internet during elections in April 2019. 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 20 December 2019, the Central Office for the Repression of Cybercrime (OCRC) arrested Ignace Sossou, without a warrant, supported by the Central Police Station in Godomey, southern Benin. His home was searched in his presence and his phone was analyzed by the technical and scientific police. 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 of 200,000 FCFA (approximately 300 euros). He is being detained in Maison d’Arret Prison, Cotonou, southern Benin. He has appealed his conviction and is waiting for the appeal to be scheduled.

Amnesty International considers that Ignace Sossou’s detention is arbitrary and in violation of the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International is 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 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, bringing it into conformity with international standards on freedom of expression, particularly by decriminalising press-offenses and the publication of false information and online press crimes.

Yours sincerely,