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Africa - Senegal

Archaic justice

Another heavy fine and suspended jail sentence for investigative journalist

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A Dakar court yesterday gave **Abdou Latif Coulibaly**, the editor of the weekly *La Gazette*, a three-month suspended jail sentence and fined him 10 million CFA francs (15,267 euros) for allegedly defaming a Senegalese businessman close to President Wade by accusing him of acting fraudulently in his dealings with the government.

Reporters Without Borders condemns the way the Senegalese authorities and several leading figures close to the government are hounding Coulibaly, one of Dakar's most respected journalists. The lawsuits that keep being brought against him constitute an unacceptable form of harassment, and the suspended prison sentences place him under a permanent threat that is liable to discourage his investigative reporting.

Yesterday's conviction serves as yet another reminder of the need to decriminalize press offences in Senegal. Reporters Without Borders urges the authorities to stop imposing prison sentences, even suspended ones, on journalists. Jail terms are archaic and disproportionate and are never an appropriate response to defamation.

President Wade has in principle given the go-ahead for a reform of Senegal's press law that would replace prison sentences by fines but the office of the National Assembly has sat on it for about eight months. This foot-dragging reflects a lack of political will.

In yesterday's case, Coulibaly was sued by Abbas Jaber, the owner of the peanut-oil processing company Suneor, over articles in two issues of the *La Gazette* in May 2010. Describing him as a personal friend of the president, the first article claimed that the government had granted him a "subsidy of 6 billion CFA francs" and had imposed a 25 per cent temporary import tax in order to protect his interests.

In the second issue, Coulibaly accused Jaber of "violating his contractual obligations with the Senegalese state." In a front-page article headlined "Suneor makes off with 16 billion in sale of land" and accompanied by a photo of Jaber, Coulibaly claimed that Jaber had sold "80 per cent of Suneor's land for 165 billion although he was contractually bound not to sell it before 2012."

Coulibaly is clearly being singled out by the Senegalese justice system. [Only last November, he was fined 20 million CFA francs \(30,000 euros\) and given a one-month suspended sentence](#) in a libel action brought by a presidential adviser.
