

US forces temporary shutdown of TikTok in major attack on First Amendment

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In an unprecedented move, the US government forced the temporary shutdown of a major social media network, TikTok, for 14 hours on Saturday, setting the stage for future violations of First Amendment rights under the incoming Trump administration.

On Saturday, millions of Americans were shocked to find that launching the TikTok app displayed a message announcing its shutdown. Individuals, small businesses, and organizations scrambled to retrieve their data and find alternatives to the widely popular CapCut video editor, also distributed by TikTok's parent company, ByteDance.

The blocking of a crucial communication tool through government censorship was a shocking awakening to the fact that, in the name of an undeclared war against China, core democratic protections are being stripped away.

The shutdown followed Friday's ruling by the Supreme Court, which asserted that the American government had the right to abridge free speech rights on the grounds of "national security" and force the sale ("divestiture") of TikTok.

The Court declared, "[F]or more than 170 million Americans, TikTok offers a distinctive and expansive outlet for expression, means of engagement, and source of community. But Congress has determined that divestiture is necessary to address its well-supported national security concerns regarding TikTok's data collection practices and relationship with a foreign adversary."

Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute, warned that, with this ruling, "the Supreme Court has weakened the First Amendment and markedly expanded the government's power to restrict speech in the name of national security."

The shutdown of TikTok services, though temporary, made actual the threat to the First Amendment inherent in the ruling.

While the Supreme Court claimed in its ruling that it was not seeking to stifle any particular viewpoint, former Wisconsin Republican Representative Mike Gallagher, the leading sponsor of the bill banning TikTok, has repeatedly made clear that the central aim of the measure is to suppress criticism of US foreign policy.

In a statement published in November 2023, the former military intelligence officer turned congressman asserted, "51 percent of Americans ages 18-24 believe Hamas was justified in its brutal terrorist attacks on innocent Israeli citizens on October 7... Where were they getting the raw news to inform this upside-down world view? The short answer is, increasingly, via TikTok."

The campaign against TikTok, while initiated under Trump, was actually put into practice under Biden, who signed a bill banning it in August 2024 unless it was sold to an American company. The bill passed overwhelmingly with bipartisan support.

The Supreme Court's ruling upholding the TikTok ban took place just two days ahead of the inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, who pledged that he would rule as a "dictator on day one."

Furthermore, the conditions under which TikTok restored service—based on private assurances from the incoming president—underscore the dictatorial character of Trump's government. He is working to establish the precedent that key civil rights can be granted or revoked at his personal discretion, a hallmark of authoritarian rule.

When TikTok resumed service on Sunday, it displayed a message saying, "As a result of President

Trump's efforts, TikTok is back in the U.S.!"

Trump posted on his Truth Social network, "I will issue an executive order on Monday to extend the period of time before the law's prohibitions take effect so that we can make a deal to protect our national security."

He added, "I would like the United States to have a 50% ownership position in a joint venture... Without U.S. approval, there is no TikTok. With our approval, it is worth hundreds of billions of dollars - maybe trillions... Therefore, my initial thought is a joint venture between the current owners and/or new owners whereby the U.S. gets a 50% ownership in a joint venture set up between the U.S. and whichever purchase we so choose."

Trump has invited TikTok Chief Executive Shou Chew to attend his inauguration on Monday, alongside prominent American oligarchs, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

Trump has made it clear that he is seeking an arrangement to enable US oligarchs, potentially including billionaire Elon Musk, to take control of a significant share of the company.

For this reason, the campaign against TikTok is not only a sweeping attack on the democratic rights of the population, but an act of international piracy, part of an effort by the United States to use its economic and military power to seize control of the "commanding heights" of the international economy, with social media networks as a critical element.

The Trump administration's 2018 National Security Strategy, which proclaimed the doctrine of "great power conflict," asserted that the US competition with China required "the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power - diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military."

The Biden administration embraced this doctrine in its 2022 National Security Strategy, calling for "the seamless combination of capabilities," integrating the "economic, technological, and information... domains."

With Trump set to take office today, his efforts to establish a personalist dictatorship will be emboldened and enabled by this bipartisan campaign to attack democratic rights on the grounds of "national security" and "competition" with Russia and China.



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