

Under Elon Musk, Twitter has approved 83% of censorship requests by authoritarian governments

The social network has restricted and withdrawn content critical of the ruling parties in Turkey and India, among other countries, including during electoral campaigns



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Elon Musk's profile, against the background of the Twitter logo, last October.

DADO RUVIC (REUTERS)

Since [Elon Musk acquired Twitter](#) in a tumultuous \$44 billion deal completed last October, the social network has turned down very few requests for content restriction or censorship from countries like Turkey and India, which have recently passed laws limiting freedom of speech and the press. Although the billionaire owner of SpaceX and Tesla presents himself as a free speech absolutist, the social network he controls has bowed to hundreds of government orders during his first six months at the helm, according to data provided by the company to a public audit that tracks pressure from governments or judges on online platforms. The most recent example was the blocking of accounts critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, two days before the [elections held in Turkey](#) last Sunday.

In India, which is immersed in an autocratic drift that for months has been choking the media, journalists and critical voices, Twitter has also seconded government bans. To justify the consent, Musk said: “The rules in India for what can appear on social media are quite strict, and we can’t go beyond the laws of a country,” and in doing so put his staff at risk, [he added](#). “If we have a choice of either our people going to prison or us complying with the laws, we will comply with the laws.” This justification came after Twitter removed content related to a BBC documentary that was highly critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which was blocked in January by the Indian government.

Musk said that he was unaware “what exactly happened” over the content situation in India, but it seems certain that New Delhi ordered Twitter to remove all publications that included images or links to the video of the documentary, which questioned the leadership of the Hindu nationalist Modi during the Gujarat riots of 2002, when he was chief minister of that state, and in which at least 1,000 Muslims lost their lives (a figure activists put at 2,500). Among the content removed by Twitter were comments by a local parliamentarian.

According to the NGO Reporters Without Borders, press freedom in India has declined drastically, falling eight points over the past year to place the country 150th in the international ranking. This has led to incidents such as the search of two local BBC offices after the documentary was blocked in a raid by tax authorities. In Turkey, most of the national media is controlled by the government and the opposition has accused the Erdogan administration of attempting to rein in social networks, the last stronghold of critical voices.

Twitter’s acquiescence to autocratic or non-liberal regimes is not an exaggeration by critics of the social network. The data, which the public audit receives automatically, speaks for itself. Since Musk’s takeover, the company has received 971 requests from governments (compared to only 338 in the six-month period from October 2021 to April 2022), fully acceding to 808 of them and partially acceding to 154. In the year prior to Musk taking control, Twitter agreed to

50% of such requests, in line with the compliance rate indicated in the company's last transparency report (none have been published since October 2022). Following the change of ownership, that figure has risen to 83%, according to the analysis of the data by the technology information portal [Rest of World](#).

“By ‘free speech,’ I simply mean that which matches the law. I am against censorship that goes far beyond the law. If people want less free speech, they will ask government to pass laws to that effect. Therefore, going beyond the law is contrary to the will of the people,” Musk wrote on Twitter in April 2022. The tycoon's syllogism in denouncing censorship beyond the law — taking those established for granted — could be considered to run against any logical reasoning, but, thus far, it is the most complex formulation on the matter. Musk has also said that it is better to censor a few than to close Twitter for all, reserving the role of arbitrator in the manner of a Roman emperor, with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down gesture. Or, in his own words: “New Twitter policy is freedom of speech, but not freedom of reach.”

On May 12, [two days before Turkey's elections](#), Twitter's global governance account announced that, “in response to legal process and to ensure Twitter remains available to the people of Turkey, we have taken action to restrict access to some content in Turkey today” in the country, which nonetheless remained visible to the rest of the world. The statement did not specify which accounts would be blocked or for what reason. According to critics, the measure affected profiles denouncing corruption in Erdogan's and his party's entourage, some pro-Kurdish accounts and others making critical comments about the 2016 coup. In moves similar to those in Russia against NGOs, or in Hungary with public universities, Ankara has urged state agencies to fight foreign influence in the media. In February, following the [devastating earthquake that struck the southeast of the country](#) and neighboring Syria, access to Twitter was briefly cut off. In the past, Wikipedia has been banned, although the government later reversed its decision.

“The day before a critical election in Turkey, Twitter appears to be acquiescing to the demands of the country's autocratic ruler, Erdogan, and is censoring speech on the platform. Given Twitter's total lack of transparency, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Musk's promises of free speech have again fallen away,” tweeted Democrat Adam B. Schiff, former chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. For Musk, free speech seems to be a slogan rather than a principle, although his credentials are becoming increasingly clear: from initial and remotely Democratic positions, in November Musk called for Republican support in the [midterm elections in the United States](#).



Two women try to connect to Twitter in a cafe in Istanbul in March 2014.

TOLGA BOZOGLU (EFE)

The Facebook precedent and hate speech

Twitter is entering the slimy role of the networks in distorting public opinion and acting as vectors of disinformation, something that the cutback of moderation and control mechanisms on Musk's network, for the sake of austerity, may contribute to fostering. Facebook, overshadowed today by [Meta's multiverse bet](#), has barely recovered from the revelation that, for the sole purpose of growth, it had tolerated hate messages that inflamed conflicts and even extermination campaigns against minorities such as the Rohingya in Myanmar. Facebook is a dark precedent of what a Twitter in freefall could look like, a platform without moderation mechanisms and owned by an iteration of Musk who is increasingly in thrall to the Republicans and their deregulatory policies, in a global scenario marked by the war in Ukraine and the upcoming U.S. presidential elections. The fact that negative and hateful messages multiplied after Musk took control of Twitter is an indicator of storm clouds.

Modi, like Erdogan in Turkey, is seeking to revalidate his mandate for a third time in next year's elections: the common denominator of autocrats. [Jair Bolsonaro](#) — another world leader

who supposedly benefited from Twitter — also tried to do for a second time but failed. According to the data, Brazil is the fourth most-favored country in terms of Twitter’s acquiescence, behind Germany, which is a surprise inclusion on the list but whose presence is related to a law passed in 2017 to limit the online dissemination of hate speech.

For months, Musk has maintained that his platform would not “censor” on behalf of the U.S. government, something that, he claimed without providing any details, he had done in the past. In November, he promised that Twitter would not “censor truthful information about anything.” That same month, he called for a “revolution against online censorship in America.” In December, he inquired whether Schiff had approved “hidden state censorship in direct violation of the Constitution of the United States.” In April, he tweeted as a parable: “Do not censor, lest you be censored.”

This months-long crusade culminated in the release of the so-called Twitter archives, a set of leaked internal documents that Musk and conservative critics of social media claimed constituted proof that the U.S. government intended to suppress free speech on the Internet. Musk claimed they showed that “[The] government paid Twitter millions of dollars to censor info from the public,” a claim that experts say is unsubstantiated and serves to fuel the conspiracy theories of many Republicans.

Erdogan’s reelection on May 28 seems beyond doubt, with or without the help of Twitter, but the platform’s nod to Modi in India does not seem to have yielded much, at least in the short-term. The state of Karnataka, the only bastion in the south of the country in the hands of Modi’s party, voted for the embattled opposition in a local election held last weekend, a snub that only portends more censure, with or without Twitter’s intervention.

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