

Facebook, others block requests on Hong Kong user data

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Facebook and its mobile messaging service WhatsApp are suspending cooperation with Hong Kong authorities to protect user information in the wake of China's passage of new security law for the financial hub

Social media platforms and messaging apps including Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Google and Twitter will deny law enforcement

requests for user data in Hong Kong as they assess the effect of a new national security law enacted last week.

Facebook and its messaging app WhatsApp said in separate statements Monday that they would freeze the review of government requests for user data in Hong Kong, "pending further assessment of the National Security Law, including formal human rights due diligence and consultations with international human rights experts."

The policy changes follow the rollout last week of laws that prohibit what Beijing views as secessionist, subversive or terrorist activities, as well as foreign intervention in the city's internal affairs. The legislation criminalizes some pro-democracy slogans like the widely used "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time," which the Hong Kong government has deemed has separatist connotations.

The fear is that the new law erodes the freedoms of the semi-autonomous city, which operates under a "one country, two systems" framework after Britain handed it over to China in 1997. That framework gives Hong Kong and its people freedoms not found in mainland China, such as unrestricted internet access.

Spokesman Mike Ravdonikas said Monday that Telegram understands "the importance of protecting the right to privacy of our Hong Kong users." Telegram has been used broadly to spread pro-democracy messages and information about the protests in Hong Kong.

"Telegram has never shared any data with the Hong Kong authorities in the past and does not intend to process any data requests related to its Hong Kong users until an international consensus is reached in relation to the ongoing political changes in the city," he said.

Twitter also paused all data and information requests from Hong Kong

authorities after the law went into effect last week, the company said. It is reviewing the national security law to assess its implications.

"Like many public interest organisations, civil society leaders and entities, and industry peers, we have grave concerns regarding both the developing process and the full intention of this law," the company said in a statement.

Twitter emphasized that it was "committed to protecting the people using our service and their freedom of expression."

Likewise, Google said in a statement that it too had "paused production on any new data requests from Hong Kong authorities" and will continue reviewing details of the new law.

Social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp have operated freely in Hong Kong, while they are blocked in the mainland under China's "Great Firewall."

Though social platforms have yet to be blocked in Hong Kong, users have begun scrubbing their accounts and deleting pro-democracy posts out of fear of retribution. That retreat has extended to the streets of Hong Kong as well.

Many of the shops and stores that publicly stood in solidarity with protesters have removed the pro-democracy sticky notes and artwork that adorned their walls.

Hong Kong's government late Monday issued implementation rules of Article 43 of the national security law, which give the city's police force sweeping powers in enforcing the legislation and come into effect Tuesday.

Under the rules, platforms and publishers, as well as internet service providers, may be ordered to take down electronic messages published that are "likely to constitute an offence endangering national security or is likely to cause the occurrence of an offence endangering national security."

Service providers who do not comply with such requests could face fines of up to 100,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$12,903) and receive jail terms of six months.

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