

Facebook appoints civil rights vice president amid pressure over racial hatred, violence on Facebook, Instagram

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Civil rights attorney Roy L. Austin, Jr., who focused on policing in the Obama administration, first at the Justice Department and then at the

White House, is Facebook's new vice president of civil rights charged with helping the social media giant curb the racial hatred and violence on its platforms that over the summer led to a month-long boycott by civil rights groups and major advertisers.

Austin will establish a new [civil rights](#) organization inside Facebook, one of the key recommendations of an internal audit of Facebook's practices released in July which warned that Facebook's failure to rein in toxic speech, racism and misinformation could have serious repercussions on the presidential election.

"Technology plays a role in nearly every part of our lives, and it's important that it be used to overcome the historic discrimination and hate which so many underrepresented groups have faced, rather than to exacerbate it," Austin said in a statement.

Pressure on Facebook escalated amid national protests over racial injustice and police brutality after the death of George Floyd under a white officer's knee. The results of a years-long civil rights audit heightened scrutiny of the spread of racism and hate on Facebook and Instagram.

Austin will take on the role of vice president of civil rights and deputy general counsel starting Jan. 19 in Washington, D.C. where he will build a small team, Facebook said. He joins Facebook from the law firm of Harris, Wiltshire & Grannis LLP, where he was a partner specializing in criminal defense and civil rights law.

Civil rights advocate Laura Murphy who led the Facebook audit praised the appointment.

"Facebook will now be taking a systematic and structural approach to addressing the many civil rights concerns that I laid out in the Facebook

Civil Rights Audit," she said in a statement provided by Facebook. "Roy Austin is a great choice for this role; I worked with him extensively during his tenure at the White House. I urge Facebook to give him the latitude and resources to tackle the audit recommendations and any other civil rights issues that arise."

The audit called for Facebook to bring in an experienced civil rights executive to guide policies and vet products, steps the auditors said were long overdue.

Hundreds of companies, including top brands Unilever, Ford and Pfizer, pulled advertising from Facebook over the summer to protest the spread of racial hatred, white supremacy and violent threats on Facebook and Instagram. The boycott organized by civil rights leaders known as #StopHateForProfit followed a push back from Facebook employees who staged a virtual "walkout."

Black users have grown increasingly frustrated with how Facebook deals with racially motivated hate speech against the Black community and the erasure of Black users' speech. They told U.S. TODAY harassment worsened as nationwide protests following Floyd's death in police custody drew renewed attention to historic racial inequities.

One of the problems, they complained, is the dearth of underrepresented minorities at Facebook, particularly in positions of influence. Despite repeated pledges to close the racial gap, 3.7% of Facebook's U.S. employees and 3% of senior executives are Black, according to a U.S. TODAY analysis of 2018 figures, the most recent data available.

The other is the company's policy of protecting all racial and ethnic groups equally, even if they do not face oppression or marginalization, centuries of systemic racism.

Neil Potts, public policy director at Facebook, told U.S. TODAY in 2019 that applying more "nuanced" rules to the daily tidal wave of content rushing through Facebook and its other apps would be challenging. Since then, Facebook has said it is taking steps to address mistakes in content moderation.

Austin will report to Facebook's [general counsel](#) Jennifer Newstead.

"It's hard to imagine anyone better qualified to help us strengthen and advance civil rights on our platform and in our company," she said in a statement.

Austin began his career as a civil rights trial lawyer with the Justice Department. From 2014 to 2017, he worked on the White House Domestic Policy Council as deputy assistant to the president for the Office of Urban Affairs, Justice and Opportunity. In this position, Roy co-authored a report on big data and civil rights, worked with President Barack Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing and helped develop the Police Data Initiative.

Rashad Robinson, president of online racial justice organization Color of Change, said Austin's addition was long overdue.

"He will bring deep expertise to a company that has demonstrated a disturbing lack of investment in understanding and tackling key civil rights issues," Robinson said in a statement.

He called on Facebook to give Austin the authority inside Facebook to make significant change.

"Facebook's top leaders must empower Austin to deliver the results our communities need," Robinson said.

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