

In the US, Trump ushers in era of dramatic deregulation

AFP, Washington

METHANE emissions, guns, river pollution, Wall Street: hand in hand with President Donald Trump, the Republican majority in Congress has begun to repeal Obama-era regulations opposed by big business.

At the very beginning of his term, the billionaire Republican president signed an order freezing any new regulations close to being finalized, and requiring that for each new rule imposed two others must be eliminated.

"We think we can cut regulations by 75 percent, maybe more," Trump said in a White House meeting with business leaders on January 23.

If details remain vague (75 percent of the number of pages in regulations? 75 percent of cost?), they reflect the clear intent of the Republican majority to satisfy the demands of the interest groups that have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in lobbying and campaign donations.

"Every day is Christmas for big business in the Trump administration," Robert Weissman, president of Public Citizen, told AFP. His nonprofit advocacy group is filing a court challenge to the order on regulations.

In practice, Trump can delay such regulations -- which have passed through a years-long review process -- but he cannot eliminate them with the simple stroke of a pen.

Republican leaders in Congress, however, have unearthed a rarely used 1996 law that allows them, through a vote,

to revoke certain regulations finalized in the last six months of the previous administration.

They have already targeted for repeal:

- a rule that would have made it harder for mining companies to dump coal-mining waste into streams and waterways;
- an anti-corruption rule requiring oil, gas and mining companies to disclose any payments made to foreign governments, including taxes and royalties;

- a rule to require oil and gas companies drilling on public lands to reduce leaks or burnoff of methane, a heat-trapping gas linked to global warming; and
- a rule aimed at keeping firearms out of the hands of certain mentally disabled people.

Trump, for his part, has signed an executive order targeting the sweeping Dodd-Frank financial reform adopted after the recession of 2008, as well as the so-called fiduciary rule that requires financial advisers to act in the interest of their clients.

The objective in each case is the same: less regulation means fewer costs for companies, and, they say, for consumers.

These rules were targeted by powerful business organizations like the US Chamber of Commerce and Freedom Partners, which accused the Obama administration of imposing excessive costs on companies, particularly through tough new environmental rules.

Landmark regulations like those in the Clean Power Plan, which would compel coal-fueled power plants to slash their carbon emissions, are also being tested in court.



US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sit down for dinner at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on February 10.

"The last eight years have been a challenge," said Paul Schlegel, director of environment and energy policy for the American Farm Bureau Federation. Farmers now have a feeling of "hope," he told AFP.

Dozens of business groups from every sector of the economy are now piling pressure on Congress to weaken the power of federal agencies.

"The signals that are being sent by the Trump administration about regulatory reform are things that we would support," said Lowell Randel, vice president of the Global Cold Chain Alliance, which represents 1,300 companies involved with refrigerated storage and transport.

The Trump administration may also choose to act more favorably on the enforcement side, possibly reducing on-site safety and quality inspections, or instructing federal agencies to issue warnings but fewer fines. The enforcement division of the Environmental Protection Agency might even be shuttered, according to the Inside EPA website.

"We don't expect leniency, but if there is a greater degree of constructive engagement, we think that would be a positive step," said Schlegel of the farm group.

With Democrats now the

minority party in Congress, resistance to deregulation will likely be led by nonprofit groups advocating for the environment and consumer protection.

The next four years could see the emergence of a more or less permanent resistance movement, with the courts as a favored battlefield.

"There will be legal challenges to every repeal," predicted Rebecca Buckwalter-Poza, of the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank.

"There are going to be a lot of hurdles, but in the meantime things will not be enforced, and it will not be possible to make new rules."

Tech firms must do more against fake news: Apple CEO

AFP, London

Technology firms must up their game in tackling "fake news", Apple chief executive Tim Cook said Saturday, calling for a major public information campaign.

"All of us technology companies need to create some tools that help diminish the volume of fake news," the US tech giant boss told the Daily Telegraph in an interview.

"We must try to squeeze this without stepping on freedom of speech and of the press, but we must also help the reader."

"Too many of us are just in the complain category right now and haven't figured out what to do."

But Cook, who met British Prime Minister Theresa May at Downing Street on Thursday, said governments should also introduce a public information campaign.

"We need the modern version of a public-service announcement campaign. It can be done quickly if there is a will," he said.

He added: "We are going through this period of time right here where unfortunately some of the people that are winning are the people that spend their time trying to get the most clicks, not tell the most truth."

"It's killing people's minds in a way."

Fake news -- fabricated reports designed to promote a particular agenda -- came to prominence during last year's US presidential election campaign.

Facebook in particular has come under pressure for failing to take action, and last month modified its system for showing trending topics.

The change is designed to ensure that trends reflect real world events being covered by multiple news outlets.

Facebook to provide ad data for independent audit

REUTERS

Facebook Inc said it would provide information about ads displayed on its platform for an audit, months after the social network admitted to overstating key ad metrics.

The audit by media regulator Media Rating Council (MRC) will likely provide more clarity to advertisers.

Facebook said in September that a metric for average user time on videos was artificially inflated as it only counted videos viewed for over three seconds.

The company will provide data including exact time in milliseconds that an ad was displayed on Facebook and its photo-sharing app Instagram to the regulator.

Facebook also said that there would be additional options for buying video ads later this year.



REUTERS/FILE

A worker uses a card machine to receive payment from a motorcyclist at a fuel station in Kolkata, India. The country's fuel demand fell 4.5 percent in January compared with the same month last year. Consumption of fuel, a proxy for oil demand, totalled 15.52 million tonnes, data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell of the oil ministry showed.

Trade protectionism could hurt business: Amazon

REUTERS

AMAZON.COM Inc warned on Friday that government actions to bolster domestic companies against foreign competition could hurt its business, in a possible reference to US President Donald Trump's "America First" agenda.

In a routine description of regulatory risks in its 2016 annual filing, the world's largest online retailer said "trade and protectionist measures" might hinder its ability to grow.

That language has not appeared in Amazon's warning about government regulation in at least the past five annual filings with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. However, the Seattle-based company has cited trade protection in those filings as a risk to its international sales and operations specifically.

The new Republican president has made job creation a cornerstone of his policies, threatening to impose tariffs on imports so companies produce and hire within the United States. Republicans in Congress also have a plan to target imports while excluding export revenue from US corporate income tax, known as a border adjustment tax.

The proposal in the US House of Representatives has divided corporate

America. Major exporters like Boeing Co have thrown their weight behind it, but a retail association has said it would raise prices for shoppers.

It was not clear what kinds of protectionist measures - whether tariffs or other actions - concerned Amazon the most, or from which countries Amazon saw the greatest risk.

Amazon so far has declined to comment on Republican lawmakers' border tax plan. It declined comment on the new language in its annual filing, which appeared under the header, "Government Regulation Is Evolving and Unfavorable Changes Could Harm Our Business." The filing did not mention the change in leadership of the White House.

Separately, Amazon said in the filing that it may face penalties for having delivered consumer products to entities covered by the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act, between 2012 and 2016.

Products included apparel, consumer electronics, software and books. Amazon said it processed goods worth about \$2,400 for an entity controlled or owned by Iran's government, for example.

"We do not plan to continue selling to these accounts in the future," Amazon said. "Our review is ongoing and we are enhancing our processes designed to identify transactions associated with individuals and entities covered by the (act)."

How algorithms (secretly) run the world

AFP, Washington

WHEN you browse online for a new pair of shoes, pick a movie to stream on Netflix or apply for a car loan, an algorithm likely has its word to say on the outcome.

The complex mathematical formulas are playing a growing role in all walks of life: from detecting skin cancers to suggesting new Facebook friends, deciding who gets a job, how police resources are deployed, who gets insurance at what cost, or who is on a "no fly" list.

Algorithms are being used -- experimentally -- to write news articles from raw data, while Donald Trump's presidential campaign was helped by behavioral marketers who used an algorithm to locate the highest concentrations of "persuadable voters."

But while such automated tools can inject a measure of objectivity into erstwhile subjective decisions, fears are rising over the lack of transparency algorithms can entail, with pressure growing to apply standards of ethics or "accountability."

Data scientist Cathy O'Neil cautions about "blindly trusting" formulas to determine a fair outcome.

"Algorithms are not inherently fair, because the person who builds the model defines success," she said.

O'Neil argues that while some algorithms may be helpful, others can be nefarious. In her 2016 book, "Weapons of Math Destruction," she cites some troubling examples in the United States:

- Public schools in Washington DC in 2010 fired more than 200 teachers -- including several well-respected instructors -- based on scores in an algorithmic formula which evaluated performance.

- A man diagnosed with bipolar disorder was rejected for employment at seven major retailers after a third-party "personality" test deemed him a high risk based on its algorithmic classification.

- Many jurisdictions are using "predictive policing" to shift resources to likely "hot spots." O'Neil says that depending on how data is fed into the system, this could lead to discovery of more minor crimes and a "feedback loop" which stigmatizes poor communities.

- Some courts rely on computer-ranked formulas to determine jail sentences and parole, which may discriminate against minorities by taking into account "risk" factors such as their neighborhoods and friend or family links to crime.

- In the world of finance, brokers "scrape" data from online and other sources in new



AFP

The complex mathematical formulas are playing a growing role in all walks of life.

ways to make decisions on credit or insurance. This too often amplifies prejudice against the disadvantaged, O'Neil argues.

Her findings were echoed in a White House report last year warning that algorithmic systems "are not infallible -- they rely on the imperfect inputs, logic, probability, and people who design them."

The report noted that data systems can ideally help weed out human bias but warned against algorithms "systematically disadvantaging certain groups."

Zeynep Tufekci, a University of North Carolina professor who studies technology and society, said automated decisions are often based on data collected about people, sometimes without their knowledge.

"These computational systems can infer all sorts of things about you from your digital crumbs," Tufekci said in a recent TED lecture.

"They can infer your sexual orientation, your personality traits, your political leanings. They have predictive power with high levels of accuracy."

Such insights may be useful in certain contexts -- such as helping medical professionals diagnose postpartum depression -- but unfair in others, she said.

Part of the problem, she said, stems from asking computers to answer questions that have no single right answer.

"They are subjective, open-ended and value-

laden questions, asking who should the company hire, which update from which friend should you be shown, which convict is more likely to reoffend."

Frank Pasquale, a University of Maryland law professor and author of "The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information," shares the same concerns.

He suggests one way to remedy unfair effects may be to enforce existing laws on consumer protection or deceptive practices.

Pasquale points at the European Union's data protection law, set from next year to create a "right of explanation" when consumers are impacted by an algorithmic decision, as a model that could be expanded.

This would "either force transparency or it will stop algorithms from being used in certain contexts," he said.

Alethea Lange, a policy analyst at the Center for Democracy and Technology, said the EU plan "sounds good" but "is really burdensome" and risked proving unworkable in practice.

She believes education and discussion may be more important than enforcement in developing fairer algorithms.

Lange said her organization worked with Facebook, for example, to modify a much-criticized formula that allowed advertisers to use "ethnic affinity" in their targeting.