

## 'It's time for significant changes': civil rights groups call for Facebook leaders to step down

By Vivian Ho for The Guardian, Tuesday 18 Dec 2018

Dozens of civil rights groups are calling for Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg to step down from Facebook's board of directors following what they described as years of the company's role in "generating bigotry and hatred towards vulnerable communities".

In a letter sent to Zuckerberg, the company's CEO, on Monday night more than 30 groups demanded a restructuring of the board to improve accountability of senior leadership in the wake of recent scandals.

"It's become abundantly clear that, as currently constituted, your leadership team is unable to adequately address the valid concerns of the civil rights community," the letter stated. "It is now time for significant changes in, not only your policies, but also your leadership structure."

"In the face of clear evidence that Facebook was being used to broadcast viral propaganda and inspire deadly bigoted campaigns, the company's leadership consistently either looked the other way, or actively worked to lobby against meaningful regulation, shifted public opinion against its allies, and personally attacked its critics," the letter states. "Though Facebook has had significant time, opportunity and the benefit of input from experts and advocacy groups to address the problems on the platform, your company chose to target civil rights groups and our allies instead of changing the way you do business."

Zuckerberg referenced the establishment of an "independent body" that "will have real teeth and power and will be transparent in the decisions that they're making, and if I want to overrule that independent body, then I won't be able to", but what that means when he controls about 60% of the company's voting shares is unclear.

In addition to calling for Zuckerberg and Sandberg to relinquish their board seats, the civil rights groups are calling for the board to create three more board seats "to diversify the board."

Facebook did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but on Tuesday, Sandberg released a nine-page update on the company's civil rights audit, which was undertaken in May by the longtime civil rights leader Laura Murphy.

"Facebook is committed to working with leading US civil rights organizations to strengthen and advance civil rights on our service," Sandberg said in a statement. "They've raised a number of important concerns, and I'm grateful for their candor and guidance. We know that we need to do more: to listen, look deeper and take action to respect fundamental rights."

Murphy applauded the company for making changes before the US midterm elections, including supporting voter engagement, cracking down on fake accounts, partnering with voting rights and election protection groups, and having dedicated reviewers to respond in a timely manner to content suggesting possible voter suppression.

But Murphy noted that work remained in the year ahead, including ensuring that any changes made would be systemic.

Madihha Ahussain, special counsel for anti-Muslim bigotry at Muslim Advocates, one of the civil rights groups to sign the letter, said on Tuesday that the update "makes clear that Facebook has done little to meaningfully address the bigotry and discrimination that pervades its platform" and Sandberg's statement "indicates a lack of understanding that, after years and years of abuse, significant reforms are urgently needed now".

"We stand by our letter demanding serious changes to Facebook's board," Ahussain said. "The board is not in a position to hold its management accountable, it doesn't match the demographics of its user community, and it doesn't understand civil rights and serious reforms to it are necessary to protect vulnerable communities."