



Trump's mass deportation agenda is at a crossroads as DHS changes leadership

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Department of Homeland Security will soon be **under new management**, an opportunity to reset President Donald Trump's immigration agenda or to double down on his signature campaign promise to conduct the largest deportation operation in American history.

The White House's political director recently encouraged party lawmakers during a retreat at the Republican president's golf club in Florida to focus on immigration enforcement against criminals, a pivot from the mass deportation agenda he ran on. House Speaker Mike Johnson said the aggressive operations have created a "hiccup" for the party, which is now embarking on a "course correction."

Yet all indications are that Trump's mass deportation operation is not stalling out but intensifying, with billions of dollars being spent to hire Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, build warehouse detention sites and meet the administration's goal of rounding up and removing some 1 million immigrants from the U.S. this year.

"We are at an interesting moment where it has been an inflection point — the public has finally seen what mass detention and mass deportation mean," said Sarah Mehta, who tracks the issue at the American Civil Liberties Union.

"This is not an agency that's slowing down," she said. "They're really going forward with some of the cruelest policies."

WATCH: Minnesota immigration crackdown continues to spark fear among people in U.S. legally

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said the president's policies have sent immigrants out of the U.S., either through forced deportations or on their own, and sealed up the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Nobody is changing the administration's immigration enforcement agenda," she said.

Senators ready to grill Trump's DHS nominee over deportations

The questions put Homeland Security at a crossroads. Secretary Kristi Noem is on her way out, and Trump's nominee to replace her, **Sen. Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma**, appears this week for Senate confirmation hearings.

After the intense deportation sweeps in Minneapolis and other cities — and the deaths of at least three U.S. citizens at the hands of officers — Democratic lawmakers are refusing to provide routine funding unless the department changes its policies.

At the same time, those who believe Trump won the White House with his mass deportation agenda are disappointed the administration did not achieve its goals last year and insist he must do better.

"There has been a lot of talk in Congress and now in the White House about kind of backing away from President Trump's, candidate Trump's, mass deportation promise," said Rosemary Jenks, co-founder of the Immigration Accountability Project, which argues for deportations.

"We believe that now is an opportunity," she said. "We've got to get the deportation numbers up."

A nation of immigrants no longer?

The debate is playing out as the United States, celebrating its 250th year, squares its founding as a nation of immigrants with images of masked federal agents breaking car windows and detaining people suspected of being in the U.S. without proper legal standing.

The Congress, controlled by Republicans, provided some \$170 billion in last year's tax cuts bill to fuel the effort, more than tripling the budget of ICE.

GOP Sen. Eric Schmitt of Missouri, in a fiery speech, fought back against the Democrats' proposed restraints. "This question about deporting illegal immigrants was on the ballot. President Trump was not bashful," he said. "And the American people supported the idea that we are going to deport people."

Yet there are signs of cracks in the Trump coalition. Some Republicans prefer what one called a more humane approach and are sharing their views with Mullin.

WATCH: Pregnant migrant girls held at Texas center criticized for inadequate care

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., considered a stalwart against illegal immigration, said in his state it's immigrants who milk most of the dairy cows, and he's heard from restaurant groups that rely on immigrants to fill jobs.

"Can we just turn back the clock and have these all these people who came in here illegally, just be back home?" he asked.

"In terms of actually implementing that, it's a lot tougher — particularly, in fact, when you realize a lot of these people, most of them, came here to seek opportunity, wanting freedom," he said. "They're working, supporting their family, contributing to organizations and community."

Mass deportation group wants more

The Mass Deportation Coalition, a group of conservative organizations including the Heritage Foundation and Erik Prince, founder of the security firm Blackwater, was formed recently to keep the administration on track.

It calls last year's focus on deporting immigrants beyond

Mark Morgan, who said that doesn't mean worksites, those who

But they're facing deportation to mainly criminals are

"The Republican side of this," he said.

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"That's why you see some of the base that's really becoming apoplectic because they're like, 'Wait a minute. You're talking about only removing criminals now?' That's not what you promised," Morgan said.

What's coming next

The deportation advocates as well as those working to protect the rights of immigrants see that the Trump administration's best chance at reaching its goals is creating an environment so unwelcoming for immigrants that they just leave — what's often called self-deportation.

Mehta, at the ACLU, expects the administration will step up efforts to end temporary permissions that allow immigrants to remain in the U.S. — particularly refugees and asylum-seekers — while their cases are making their way through the system. She called it a "deliberate attempt to make people undocumented — to take away lawful status — and then to be able to enforce against them."

Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., said he fears more nonviolent immigrants will be rounded up to fill the new warehouses being equipped as the Trump administration tries to reach its deportation goals.

That's unacceptable, he said, and among "the key questions that Senator Mullin will have to answer at his confirmation hearing."

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