

UK government to make it easier for police to stop protests

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**Protesters in orange high-vis jackets sit on a London street while a police officer is speaking to them, There are a number cars and a bus that have stopped.
Small groups of activists have blocked streets under new tactics designed to force the government into action on climate change [File: Henry Nicholls/Reuters]**

London, January 23 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom government plans to revise the law to give police more powers to crack down on protests, after demonstrations that have seen some people blocking roads or

marching slowly.

The amendments to the Public Order Bill will broaden the legal definition of “serious disruption”, giving police greater flexibility and “absolute clarity” over when they can intervene in a protest.

Police have already been given additional powers to prevent protesters from using “guerrilla” tactics. “The right to protest is a fundamental principle of our democracy, but this is not absolute,” Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in a statement on Sunday night.

“We cannot have protests conducted by a small minority disrupting the lives of the ordinary public. It’s not acceptable and we’re going to bring it to an end.”

The moves against the right to protest follow a series of demonstrations — mostly by activists who have adopted more aggressive tactics to push the government into doing more about climate change — that have blocked the M25, the London orbital motorway that is the busiest road in the country, and closed down parts of the capital.

Under the proposed changes, police in the UK will be able to close down protests before they even happen, and be allowed to consider the “total impact” of a series of protests rather than handling them individually.

The Public Order Bill is currently in the final stages of debate in parliament and has faced strong criticism from rights groups who say it gives the police too much power. The bill includes a new criminal offence for those who try to lock themselves to objects or buildings, and allows courts to restrict the freedoms of protesters if they are thought to be likely to cause “serious disruption”.

Rights group Liberty UK, which has been campaigning against the bill, said on Twitter that the proposed legislation was “an attack on people’s ability to stand up to power.”

Metropolitan Police Chief Mark Rowley welcomed the proposed changes, which he said were about clarifying the complex legal situation facing the police. “We have not sought any new powers to curtail or constrain protest, but have asked for legal clarity about where the balance of rights should be struck,” Rowley said in a statement.

“Providing such clarity will create a clearer line for the police to enforce when protests impact upon others who simply wish to go about their lawful business,” he said. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, passed in April last year, introduced an offence of public nuisance, created powers for the police to place conditions on noisy protests, and increased the sentences for obstructing the highway.

The legislation fuelled widespread protests amid concerns about its effect on civil liberties.

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