# UK government’s new laws threaten to silence peaceful protests and erode civil liberties



The UK Government’s recent announcement to amend Sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 signals a troubling escalation in the state’s efforts to clamp down on dissent—once again prioritising community “stability” over the fundamental rights of peaceful protest. These changes, cloaked in the guise of protecting local communities from disruption, are a clear attempt to weaken civil liberties and give police unchecked powers to quash legitimate demonstrations.

Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood’s assertion that the right to protest must be curtailed to prevent interference with the “safety and wellbeing of communities” reveals the true intent: a government increasingly beholden to corporate interests and elite influences that view dissent as a threat rather than a cornerstone of democracy. The rhetoric about balancing protest rights with community safety dangerously undermines the importance of free expression, especially when these powers are wielded disproportionately—particularly against those mobilising against government policies.

Since 2022, police powers under legislation like the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 have been used to impose conditions on hundreds of protests, often targeting environmental activists, anti-austerity groups, and other legitimate dissenters, not just violent or disruptive protestors. The fact that the Metropolitan Police has been responsible for the vast majority of restrictions highlights the bias in enforcement and the increasing criminalization of peaceful activism. Arrests and penalties serve as a chilling message: dissent will be met with heavy-handed repression.

The new legislation's broadened scope—redefining ‘serious disruption’ and expanding ‘community’ to include anyone affected—further blurs the line between ordinary citizens and protestors, paving the way for even stricter restrictions. It effectively shifts the goalposts, allowing authorities to justify limiting protests based on perceived “cumulative” impacts, regardless of their peaceful intent. This opens the door for widespread suppression, all under the guise of protecting communities.

Legal guidance confirms that organisers and participants can now face prosecution, fines, or imprisonment for failing to adhere to conditions imposed by police, which can include restrictions on location, timing, number of participants, or routes. This effectively silences those exercising their democratic rights and makes legal protest increasingly difficult, fostering an environment of fear and censorship.

What we are witnessing is a government desperate to silence dissent and maintain control amid growing public unease with its policies—particularly in light of recent political upheaval. The election results, with opposition parties gaining a voice, highlight that the government’s approach to protest is increasingly out of touch. Rather than embracing genuine debate or addressing societal grievances, it seeks to tighten the screws—favoring a climate of suppression over democratic engagement.

As foundations of free speech are eroded, the real casualties are the voices of ordinary citizens and activists standing up against injustice. This legislation isn’t about safeguarding communities; it’s about silencing opposition and consolidating power. The attempt to frame peaceful protest as a threat is a dangerous step toward authoritarianism, and we must resist these encroachments on our liberties before they become irreversible.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/shabana-mahmood-stonewall-government-manchester-crime-b1253351.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-police-powers-to-protect-communities-from-disruption-caused-by-protests> - The UK Home Office has introduced new police powers to manage protests, allowing forces to consider the cumulative impact of repeated demonstrations when deciding to impose restrictions. This includes amending Sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 to enable officers to assess the overall effect of frequent protests and impose conditions on public processions and assemblies. Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood stated that while the right to protest is fundamental, it must be balanced with the freedom of others to live without fear, particularly highlighting concerns within the Jewish community.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-protest-powers-june-2022-to-march-2024/police-protest-powers-june-2022-to-march-2024> - Data from 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales, along with the British Transport Police, indicates that between 28 June 2022 and 31 March 2024, 10 forces utilised powers under Sections 12, 14, or 14ZA of the Public Order Act 1986, as amended by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. These powers were used to apply conditions to 473 protests, with the Metropolitan Police applying them to 448 protests (95% of the total). Additionally, 277 individuals were arrested for breaching conditions at processions or assemblies during this period.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-order-bill-overarching-documents/public-order-bill-factsheet> - The Public Order Bill builds upon the public order measures in Part 3 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, updating the powers in the Public Order Act 1986. These updates enable the police to impose conditions on protests, provide for a statutory offence of intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance, and increase the maximum penalty for the offence of wilful obstruction of a highway. The Bill aims to balance the right to protest with the need to prevent serious disruption to the community.
5. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2023/9780348247626> - The Public Order Act 1986 (Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023 amend provisions in the Public Order Act 1986 concerning the definition of 'serious disruption to the life of the community'. These amendments refine the list of examples constituting serious disruption and require police to consider the cumulative impact of multiple public processions or assemblies in the same area. The term 'community' is extended to include anyone affected by the public procession, regardless of whether they live or work in the area.
6. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/protests-potential-offences-during-protests-demonstrations-or-campaigns-annex> - The Crown Prosecution Service provides guidance on potential offences during protests, demonstrations, or campaigns. Under Section 14(4) and (5) of the Public Order Act 1986, it is an offence for organisers or participants to fail to comply with conditions imposed on a public assembly. The maximum penalty for organisers is six months’ imprisonment, a level 4 fine, or both, and for participants, a level 4 fine. The guidance outlines the elements and evidence required for prosecution and notes that a reasonable or lawful excuse is a defence.
7. <https://www.greenandblackcross.org/guides/laws/section-12-14/> - The Green and Black Cross provides a guide on Sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986, which deal with conditions on public processions and assemblies. The guide explains that police can impose conditions to prevent serious public disorder, damage to property, or disruption to the community. Examples of conditions include restricting the location, duration, number of attendees, or route of a protest. The guide also discusses the process of imposing conditions and the potential consequences of non-compliance.