

UK Sunak government moves to outlaw protests over Gaza, with Labour Party backing

Robert Stevens
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Britain's Conservative government has revealed plans to ban protests at sites including Parliament, the Whitehall seat of government, City and Town halls and MPs homes. The move is targeted immediately at protest against Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza but has a much wider application.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak—referring to the mass demonstrations over Gaza and those against MPs backing the genocide—told senior police at a summit in Downing Street, “There is a growing consensus that mob rule is replacing democratic rule... We simply cannot allow this pattern of increasingly violent and intimidatory behaviour which is, as far as anyone can see, intended to shout down free debate and stop elected representatives doing their job.”

Referring to a peaceful protest on February 21 outside Parliament when MPs were due to vote on a Scottish National Party ceasefire motion, a Home Office policy paper published following the police leaders' summit stated, “In recent months, we have witnessed attempts to hijack legitimate protests and subvert the democratic process.” This culminated with “protestors [who] threatened to force Parliament to ‘lock its doors’.”

Such incidents were not “legitimate means of achieving change through force of peaceful argument. They are part of a pattern of increasingly intimidatory behaviour seemingly intended to shout down and coerce elected representatives and hijack the democratic process through force itself,” it said.

These lies are to justify proposals to restrict and ban protests, as part of an overall clampdown on fundamental democratic rights that have been in the works for years and have been brought forward in response to the biggest anti-war protests since those against the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The *Times* newspaper on February 23, under a headline “Pro-Palestinian protesters plotted to force parliament into lockdown,” first propagated the lie that protesters had tried

to shut down parliament ahead of what turned out to be an aborted ceasefire vote. It wrote “*The Times* has obtained a video of a speech [Director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign Ben Jamal] gave in the build up to the protest in which he tells a crowd: ‘We want so many of you to come that they will have to lock the doors of parliament itself.’”

The speech was in fact given by Jamal on February 17, at the conclusion of a national rally in the capital attended by a quarter of a million people. Jamal actually told the crowd that on February 21, “we are planning the biggest lobby in parliamentary history. We want to see a queue stretching from Parliament all the way through Whitehall. We want so many of you to come that they will have to lock the doors of parliament itself.”

Far from a “lockdown” of Parliament what was being proposed was a lobby of MPs with people asked to line up in an orderly queue. Responding to an attack on the words he used by *Guardian* journalist Marina Hyde, who joined the right-wing pile-on, Jamal posted on X, “I wasn't calling for people to come to a protest outside parliament but a lobby inside. Hence the reference was not to the doors having to be locked to keep protestors out but so many to lobby that there wouldn't be room for more. I also said, I want to see a queue stretching all the way down Whitehall. I'm not sure I'm aware of an insurrection that people queued to join.”

None of this matters to a ruling elite desperate to impose its draconian plans. Attending the Downing Street summit, according to the Home Office, were the “Prime Minister, Home Secretary, Policing Minister and Security Minister [Tom Tugendhat],” who discussed with “senior policing leaders... how police forces could be supported to protect the democratic process from intimidation, disruption or subversion.”

The Home Office policy paper, “Defending democracy policing protocol”, states, “In recent months, we have witnessed attempts to hijack legitimate protests and subvert the democratic process. Elected representatives have been

threatened and had their family homes targeted. Council meetings have been repeatedly disrupted and, in some cases, abandoned. Constituency fundraisers of different political parties have been overrun. Last Wednesday, protestors threatened to force Parliament to ‘lock its doors’.”

£31 million “of additional funding” would be allocated “for the protection of the democratic process and elected representatives.”

The paper announced “The Home Office, National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), Association of PCCs and College of Policing “have agreed the new Defending Democracy Policing Protocol...”

Among the repressive measures it contains are:

“When notified of an upcoming event at least 48 hours beforehand, police forces will commit to engaging with the organisers to ensure an appropriate policing response can be put in place where needed alongside any measures provided by Parliament prior to dissolution or government during the pre-election period.”

“Protests at the home addresses of elected representatives, including MPs and councillors, should generally be considered to be intimidatory, and the police have adequate powers, including Section 42 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, to direct protestors away.”

A stipulation with staggering implications reads, “*Protests at representatives’ parties’ offices, democratic venues (such as Parliament or Town Halls) or at political events (such as constituency fundraisers or meetings) should not be allowed to (i) prevent or inhibit the use of the venue, attendance at the event or access to and from it or (ii) cause alarm, harassment or distress to attendees through the use of threatening or abusive words or disorderly behaviour, in keeping with public order laws.*”

A massive spying operation is to be mounted and police flooded into areas of the country specified as “flashpoints” under the plans. Each police force “will closely monitor intelligence and community tensions and engage regularly with elected members. In addition to existing police responses, through a new local communities fund, police forces will provide additional patrols in local communities in response to potential flashpoints, bolstering police visibility and public confidence.”

With the backing of the Crown Prosecution Service, new guidance will be given to “all police officers on the policing of democratic events, including surgeries, fundraisers and protests, including in Parliament Square, to ensure all officers know their powers and have clear guidance on when to use them. The College of Policing will work with forces across England and Wales to ensure that forces are aware of the steps that they can take to minimise the impact of these

protests.”

The *Mail* reported that Sunak warned police leaders, who are required “to report back on how they have implemented these measures by April,” that the many authoritarian powers they already have must be enforced. “We also need to demonstrate more broadly to the public that you will use the powers you already have, the laws that you have”, said the prime minister.

Foremost in demanding a crackdown on the protests, based on the lie that they are antisemitic is the Zionist Community Security Trust (CST). Sunak met with the CST Wednesday evening, which is akin to meeting with Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu. *Politico* reported that Sunak agreed to hand over “£18 million a year for the next four years to the CST”, up from the current £15 million. “Sunak told Jewish leaders there is no ‘context’ in which its acceptable to beam antisemitic tropes onto Big Ben”.

The assault on democratic rights was introduced in Parliament on Thursday by Security Minister Tugendhat to the handful of MPs who bothered to show up. He repeated the lies about demonstrators, which he described as “thugs” who “threatened to force Parliament to ‘lock its doors’”.

Labour Shadow Minister for Security Dan Jarvis pledged to work with the government, stating, “We cannot and will not allow a minority to pose security threats, or allow racial hatred to ever go unchallenged or to undermine our democracy.” Calling for the government to move faster he urged, “Recent protests, alongside threats to and intimidation of politicians, have also raised the issue of what is defined as hateful extremism. The Government have not yet brought forward a definition, but that would be helpful in countering threats and intimidation. Can the Minister say when the Government... will bring forward a definition, and outline when the Government will bring forward an updated counter-extremism strategy? “



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