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Activists Warn Against Face-Covering Ban at Protests, Citing Risks to Safety

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Civil rights campaigners and protest groups have issued fresh warnings over the Government's plan to ban face coverings at demonstrations, arguing the policy could impede activists' safety and deter legitimate dissent. Critics say the measure may expose vulnerable individuals to danger while offering only limited benefits for policing and public order.

The proposed law, contained within the Crime and Policing Bill, would allow police to prohibit face coverings at protests, possibly affecting masking for religious, health, or privacy reasons. Liberty, a major civil liberties organisation, cautions that this approach could affect Muslim women wearing niqabs, disabled individuals shielding from infections, and dissidents seeking to avoid surveillance. Ruth Ehrlich, Head of Policy & Campaigns at Liberty, said activists “wear masks for health or religious reasons,” and risk arrest before exemptions can be asserted, which can only come post-arrest. She warned police could “ban face coverings and then arrest anyone who refuses to uncover.”

Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, who supports the legislation, says the powers are necessary to curb militant tactics linked to pro-Palestinian “black bloc” demonstrations and violent disruption. She argues that such measures are about “public safety and ensuring transparency at protests.” But opponents argue that removing anonymity will discourage peaceful participation, particularly from minority and vulnerable communities.

Human rights advocates also highlight parallels with recommendations from the previous Conservative-led government, which initially proposed similar restrictions amid far-right and anti-immigration unrest. The new bill would allow designated protest zones around places of worship to be made mask-free, even if the demonstration itself is peaceful and focused on social issues. Liberty warns that this could effectively ban protests in many urban areas.

Members of Parliament (MPs) on both the left and right have expressed concern. One Conservative MP noted that the policy could disproportionately affect women and disabled people, preventing them

from taking part unless willing to risk identification and potential legal consequences.

Proponents contend that face-covering bans support police efforts to identify offenders and maintain public order. Yet critics argue there is little evidence face coverings significantly increase violence or disorder at protests, and enforcing the rules may place unnecessary burdens on police resources.

Several health charities and religious organisations have threatened legal action, claiming the law would violate human rights protections under the Human Rights Act 1998, legislation that guarantees personal freedoms and protections against discrimination.

As the Bill progresses through Parliament, debate is expected to intensify. The outcome will test the balance between state authority and civil liberties, a defining challenge for modern protest policy.