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Activists plan to fight interference by police

By Matthew Leung

SOCIAL and labour activists plan to fight excessive police interference in the handing of petitions to the Government.

The activists said they were concerned about recent instances of police interference following the "siege" at the Legislative Council chambers last month by hundreds of livestock farmers.

At a recent meeting, a group of lobbyists called for the scrapping of the regulation that required petitioners to obtain prior police approval.

The lobbyists included representatives from the Christian Industrial Committee, the Society for Community Organisation and the Hongkong Social Workers' General Union.

Under the existing Public Order Ordinance, groups of more than 30 people must apply for a licence to hold a demon-

stration. The application must be made at least seven days in advance.

Groups of less than 30 people are also required to notify the police before holding a demonstration.

The police, in the interest of public safety, have the power to ban potentially unruly public meetings and to deal with disturbances or possible breaches of the peace at meetings.

The group said future petition groups, regardless of size, should not have to apply for a permit.

All that should be required was for them to inform the police in advance as a "matter of courtesy", the group said.

They said it was a basic human right, in a free society, to demonstrate if it was for a good cause and if it was conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner.

There was simply no reason for the Government to discourage such proceedings, they said.

The police tightened security measures following the violent protest by farmers outside the Legco chambers. No large-scale gatherings are now allowed in the vicinity.

The Government has said that future gatherings must take place "in a suitably open area", such as Edinburgh Place or Charter Garden, and only small numbers of representatives could approach "Legco territory" to hand in petitions.

On November 8, more than 120 workers marching to Government House had to split into small groups before they were allowed to hand in their petitions supporting the setting up of a central provident fund.

On November 11, police prevented two protest groups from

gathering outside the Legco chambers.

They were forced to go to Charter Garden to voice their protests against a Government decision not to introduce a central provident fund.

The Joint Committee on the Promotion of Democratic Government had to change its petition route twice because of police intervention.

They were told not to walk from Hongkong University to Government House on November 15.

Police also stopped 700 marchers from demonstrating against the Government Survey Office report outside Government House.

The march eventually ended at the Government Secretariat, while 20 representatives were allowed to hand in their petition at Government House.