It is time for a citizens' petition law

Apon Zahir
is a senior research associate at the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS).

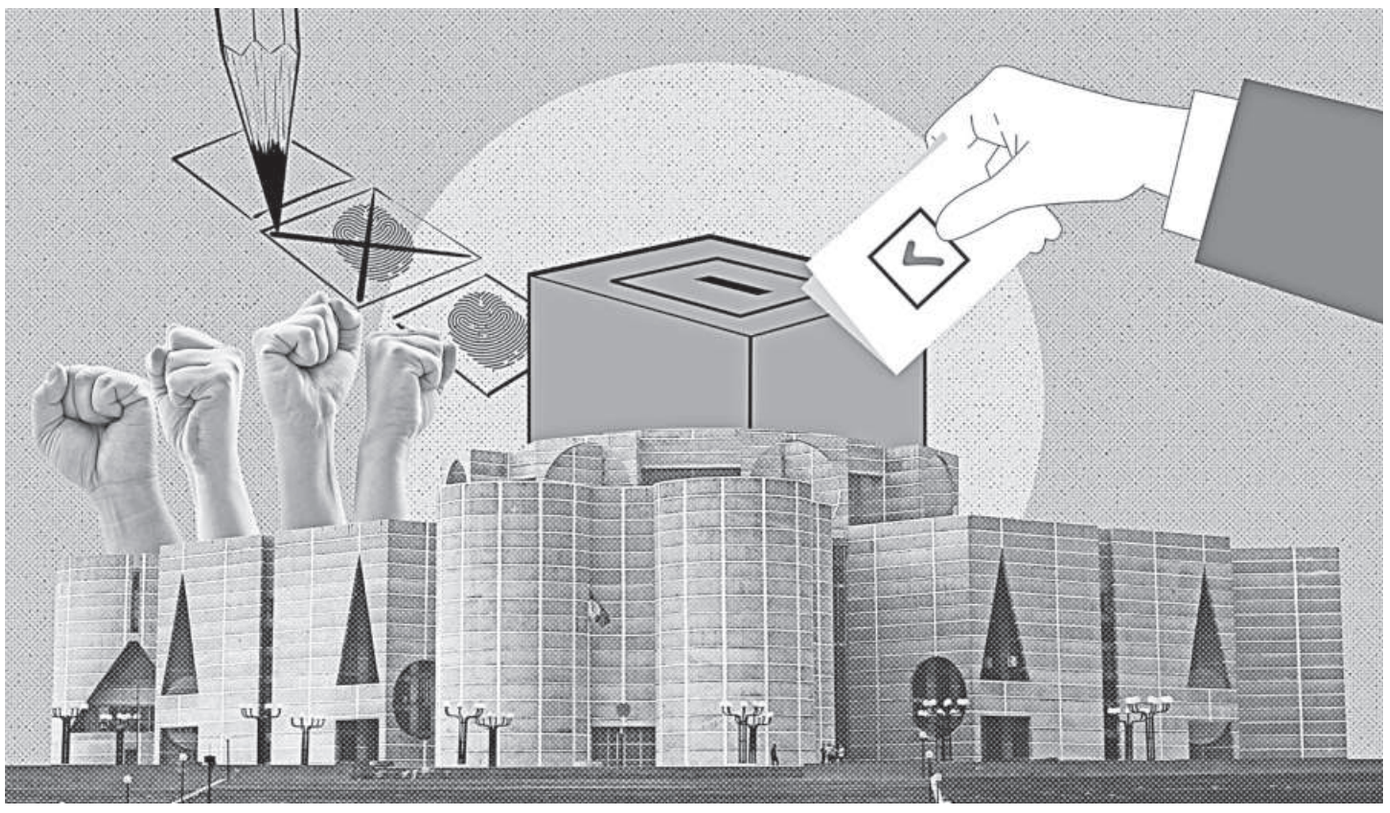
APON ZAHIR

A year ago, blood was shed on the streets of our country. Thousands of people, especially the youth, joined a mass movement with anger in their hearts and hope for change. They demanded more than a change of leadership; they called for reform in the very process of governance. That movement, which we now remember as the "July Uprising," revealed two powerful truths. One, it demonstrated the political awareness and courage of our youth. Two, it exposed a fundamental weakness in our democracy: that ordinary citizens, particularly young people, have no institutional mechanism to communicate directly with the state.

One cannot expect civic participation in governance under a fascist regime. However, even if Bangladesh manages to return to democracy through the ongoing efforts of the interim government, reform commissions, and the activities of all political parties, the means of exercising a citizen's fundamental rights will remain largely limited to the ballot box. Citizens are effectively confined to casting a vote once every five years. Beyond that, they have no meaningful way to participate in the state's decision-making processes. Ironically, citizens who are now under the age of 32 have never even had the chance to vote in a real election, due to bad politics. And yet, decisions made by the state affect every aspect of their lives, including the job market, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and the legal system.

This policy vacuum is also felt by practically every person whenever there is a strike due to political unrest, when schools and workplaces are forced to close down, or when people spend hours in traffic due to road blockages by yet another protest over yet another issue.

People often ask, "How can our voices reach the parliament?" The truth is, there is no defined process through which the voice of the common citizen can reach the legislature. Even if a matter is occasionally raised in parliament, either out of goodwill by a politician or through the efforts of an NGO or journalist, no law or convention in Bangladesh allows citizens to formally initiate a matter of public concern. Under the current system, there is also no mechanism to obligate or hold MPs accountable to the demands of their constituency. This institutional void has time and again led to unrest and violence. When there is no peaceful avenue to be heard, people are left with no choice but to block roads and protest, often risking their lives.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

In many countries, particularly developed democracies, clear constitutional and legal frameworks exist that allow citizens to bring their voices into the halls of power. These mechanisms are known as "citizens' petitions" or "citizens' initiatives." In countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland, citizens can propose legislation or policy changes by collecting a required number of signatures. This process creates an institutional bridge between the people and the state, a platform where citizens can participate in shaping policy without resorting to protest.

In the UK, for instance, the government operates an official e-petition platform where anyone can submit a proposal. If a petition garners 10,000 signatures, the government must respond formally. If it reaches 100,000 signatures, the matter is potentially considered for parliamentary debate. The entire system is digital, transparent, and open to public participation. No one needs to take to the streets or face police batons; instead, state policy can be challenged through facts, logic, and social mobilisation.

Germany goes even further in upholding civil rights. Article 17 of the German Basic Law guarantees the "right to petition," allowing any citizen to submit a proposal to the parliamentary Petitions Committee. If a petition receives over 50,000 signatures, the petitioner is entitled to present their case directly before the committee. This is more than just an administrative process; it confers political legitimacy. The thoughts of an ordinary citizen are heard at the very table of lawmakers. That is the true power of democracy.

In Finland, the Citizens' Initiative Act was passed in 2012. According to this law, if 50,000 citizens support a legislative proposal within six months, it must be submitted to parliament and processed like any other bill. What makes this remarkable is that the proposal does not require the support of any political party to be introduced. It is a system that reflects a fundamental trust: that the state listens to its people.

In Bangladesh, no such legal mechanism exists. Our parliament does not have a citizens' petitions committee. There is no concept of a public hearing, nor is there an official online platform for petitions. Even if a citizen sends a formal proposal to parliament, there is no obligation to consider it.

Therefore, a citizens' petition act should be introduced. This law should establish a clear framework: how many signatures must be gathered for a proposal to be submitted to a parliamentary committee? At what threshold does the proposal become eligible for formal debate in parliament? Such a law would also align perfectly with the vision of a "digital Bangladesh." It would require a neutral, government-backed online platform through which citizens could—securely, transparently, and inclusively—submit proposals and gather support through digital signatures.

This law would not merely offer young people a platform to speak; it would strengthen the very foundation of our democracy. A citizen petition system would allow for opposition views and alternative ideas to be aired, not suppressed. It would compel our political leaders to acknowledge that citizens are not just voters, but also active participants and thought leaders in national development.

A common counterargument is that the people of Bangladesh are not yet ready for such a system. But is this view truly credible? If anything, the July uprising has shown the opposite: people are ready; they are simply denied institutional access. If people are prepared to voice their demands by shedding their blood, surely they are also willing to speak through pens and signatures. What's missing is the path, and it is our responsibility to clear it.

If we wish to move away from an era of instability, unrest, and reactionary politics towards a democracy that is inclusive, participatory, and transparent, a citizens' petition act is essential. It is more than just legal reform; it is a transformation in mindset. The state must no longer say, "We will decide whether or not to hear you," but rather, "We are here to listen."

A society matures only when it chooses reason over violence. Citizens' petitions are a path to reason. Let us build that path so that our brothers and sisters need not speak through blood, but rather shape the future of Bangladesh with information, argument, and signatures. A future where even the most ordinary citizen can proudly say: "This state listens to me."

The future of Bangladesh depends on trust

Ashfaq Zaman
is the founder of Dhaka Forum and a strategic international affairs expert.

ASHFAQ ZAMAN

In Bangladesh, we often talk about roads, bridges, export zones, and shiny digital systems. These are the signs we look to when we speak of progress. But there's one kind of infrastructure that we've quietly left behind. We don't debate it on talk shows. We don't measure it in megawatts or kilometres. Yet without it, everything else struggles to stand. That missing piece is social trust.

Right now, Bangladesh is rising in numbers. Our GDP is growing. Our global partnerships are expanding. Our cities are full of cranes and construction. And yet, for all this growth, we seem to be shrinking in another way. People do not seem to trust one another. They don't trust institutions. They don't trust the process. We are moving forward on paper, but drifting apart in spirit.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama once called social trust the glue that holds society together. He meant the basic belief that others will act fairly, that institutions will serve everyone, and that public life is not a game rigged in advance. In countries where this kind of trust exists, people pay their taxes more willingly. Governments spend more effectively. Citizens work together more easily. Trust, it turns out, is not just a moral value. It is a foundation for prosperity.

Here in Bangladesh, that foundation is weakening. The December 2024 pulse survey by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) indicates this deterioration of trust. It's a warning sign. When people believe that success depends on connections rather than competence, it becomes hard to dream and hard to believe that rules matter at all.

When people feel cheated, they often start to cheat, not out of malice, but to survive. You hear it all the time. "Everyone's doing it. Why shouldn't I?" In this way, mistrust becomes contagious. One small betrayal leads to another. Before long, a quiet cynicism seeps into everyday life.

This isn't just a Bangladeshi problem. Many countries have gone through similar phases. South Korea, for example, faced a major trust crisis in the 1970s. Their response wasn't limited to economic planning. They made public budgeting more transparent so people could see where every won, the South Korean currency, was going. They introduced tools so that citizens can directly provide the government with feedback. And they reimagined education, emphasising ethical citizenship, not just grades and ranks. Bit by bit, that changed how people felt about the system. It became more open, more accountable, more human.

Malaysia also went through a period of deep division after the ethnic riots of 1969. In response, they introduced *"Rukun Negara,"* a five-point national philosophy focused on unity and justice. These weren't empty slogans. They were taught in schools, repeated in civil service training, and reflected in how the government communicated. Later, they even set up citizen feedback mechanisms within their policy labs, making people feel part of the process rather than subjects of it.

Bangladesh is stepping into a more complex world, trying to balance relationships with China, India, and the West. At the same time, we're rolling out digital systems like e-filing, online land records, and AI-based services. None of these will succeed if people don't trust them.

There's a lot Bangladesh can learn from these examples because trust is not something that appears on its own. It has to be designed and consistently practised.

And right now, we need it more than ever. Bangladesh is stepping into a more complex world, trying to balance relationships with China, India, and the West. At the same time, we're rolling out digital systems like e-filing, online land records, and AI-based services. None of these will succeed if people don't trust them.

An investor won't stay in a market where the rules change without warning. Young people won't believe in democracy if it feels like a show where the outcome is the same as before.

Part of our problem is that we often try to build consensus without first rebuilding trust. That's why reform commissions and national dialogues so often fall flat. When people come to the table already suspicious of one another's motives, no agreement lasts long. Consensus cannot be forced. It has to be rooted in good faith.

So, what can we do? For starters, we need to make transparency a right, not a favour. Every ministry should publish its spending, projects, and results so that people can understand them. Digital dashboards. Open tenders. Public feedback. In some places, technologies like blockchain can help track things like land transactions or local budgets in a way that's tamper-proof and clear.

We also need to rethink education. Our students need more than math and memorisation. They need to learn how to think critically, how to listen, and how to disagree without attacking. Subjects like design thinking, media literacy, civic responsibility, ethics, and even patriotism should be woven into the curriculum. Our schools and universities should be the spaces where young people learn to trust each other and build together.

We also cannot avoid the issue of inequality. When people feel left behind, they also stop believing in the system. Reducing inequality is not just about fairness. It's about social stability. It's about giving everyone a reason to invest in the country's future.

Media, too, plays a role. We need journalism that informs rather than inflames and holds power accountable without becoming a tool of power. Independent media councils and fact-checking bodies can help restore faith in what we read and hear.

And perhaps most importantly, our politics must lead by example. We need moments where leaders from different sides come together, for education, for climate, and national wellbeing, not just for show, but as a genuine signal that disagreement doesn't have to mean disunity.

According to an article published on the World Bank Blogs, trust in institutions is one of the strongest predictors of a country's ability to grow and transform. Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom found that even the most fragile communities can thrive when trust is present and respected.

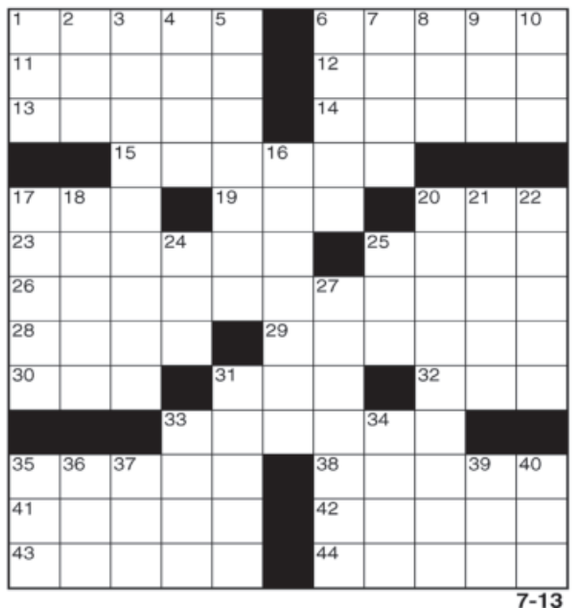
Imagine a Bangladesh where a student believes that the public exam was fair, where a small business owner knows that policy won't change overnight. That is not a dream. That is a plan.

We don't need more slogans. We need more trust.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Pool fill
6 Asimov forte
11 Mindful
12 Donut-shaped
13 Freezing
14 Speak
15 "The Apartment" star
17 Before today
19 Snaky swimmer
20 Spree
23 Home to Duke
25 Band sample
26 Custom
28 Singer Burl
29 Forking over
30 Pitch's kin
31 Hotel feature
32 Pindar work
33 Soap opera
35 Poisonous
38 Gold-loving king
41 Bold way to solve crosswords
42 Game setting
43 Clamorous
44 Hardly cool

DOWN
1 Funny fellow
2 Really impress
3 Tough challenge
4 Buffalo's lake
5 Carnivore's craving
6 Bar seat
7 Hokey stuff
8 Lyricist Gershwin
9 In shape
10 Bar rocks
16 Jotting spot
17 Let on
18 Tropical fruit
20 Force studiers
21 Improve, in a way
22 Canyon
24 " a Rebel"
25 Parched
27 Crew member
31 Baseball's Dent
33 Confession list
34 Cork's country
35 Light metal
36 Lennon's love
37 Clock numeral
39 Plus
40 Utter



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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