The Big Read: Online petitions — just 'noise' and attention-seeking, or a way for citizens to make themselves heard?

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Stirred by a strongly worded opinion piece about the dearth of spaces for live acts by local musicians, Muhammad Ierfan Lufti wrote a letter addressed to the Singapore Government in 2016, pasted it on online petition hosting site Change.org, and waited.

A day was all it took for the then student and budding musician to gain more than 1,000 signatories from like-minded musicians and music lovers, before three news sites noticed his petition.

Change.org got the rest "covered", automatically triggering emails to his chosen recipients — which included President Halimah Yacob, who was then chairman of the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee — once his virtual signature collective drive reached "milestones", such as the next 100 or 1,000 supporters.

The committee, in fact, does not consider online petitions, but Mr Ierfan, now 27, figured there was no other way for an under-resourced individual like him "to get (his) voice heard" since it is illegal to hold a physical signing drive without a permit.

Mr Ierfan is among a rising number of Singaporeans who are turning to online petitions to champion various causes, from animal rights to banning heavy metal concerts.

In retrospect, he felt that his petition generated an ample groundswell of support "without actually having to do much", although, admittedly, "nothing really came out of it" and it became a celebration of sorts for those who were passionate about live music.

Last April, following two back-to-back fatal accidents, another netizen, known only as Gen Y, started a petition on Change.org, calling for the removal of discretionary right turns at traffic junctions.

He closed the petition after gaining 16,600 supporters in five days, and the airing of his suggestion on multiple news outlets nudged the Land Transport Authority to announce that it will install red-amber-green arrows at some 1,600 traffic junctions in the coming years.

"A petition is not a confrontation, nor is it a tool to assign blame. It is a formal appeal to the authorities in respect of a particular cause," Gen Y said as he signed off.

With the proliferation of petition websites such as Change.org – which offer online users a one-stop and anonymous platform to solicit collective action – and Singaporeans' growing readiness to use them, several questions arise: How should online petitions factor into policymaking, if at all? How should the Government — which has traditionally not taken these petitions very seriously due to their procedural shortcomings — deal with these public appeals, which make up public feedback yet could be susceptible to abuse and manipulation?

While several Members of Parliament (MPs) and experts interviewed by TODAY pointed out the dangers of allowing policies to be swayed by online petitions, some noted that it is a legitimate form of public feedback which should not be discounted entirely.

Getting heard

Online petitions here have generally gained significant traction in the past few years, with recent petitions on popular sites such as Change.org, GoPetition and iPetitions garnering increasingly large numbers of signatures.

While only some 40 petitions emerged in 2016 when Mr Ierfan posted his, 2017 saw more than 100, followed by more than 150 petitions last year.

In the first three months of this year alone, Singaporeans had already created about 60 petitions – a stark contrast to a decade ago when TODAY counted only 11 petitions for the whole of 2009.

In terms of the type of petitions, the ones which focus on moral values or social justice tend to generate the most interest among people here.

Petitions this year that made it to the top 10 list – in terms of number of signatures – were two that generated more than 83,000 and 65,000 signatures respectively. The first was a call for stiffer punishments for animal abusers following the Platinium Dogs Club saga in January.

The second was an attempt to seek justice for a Gojek driver, who was investigated by the authorities after a video of his dispute with a female passenger over Electronic Road Pricing charges went viral online.

In all, as many as 23 petitions with more than 10,000 signatures each emerged in the past 12 months alone, in spontaneous shows of indignation, concern and support.

In the United Kingdom for example, these petitions would have triggered replies from its Parliament, which is mandated to respond to every petition with at least 10,000 signatures and debate each one which has at least 100,000 names to it.

In the United States, the Barack Obama administration had adopted a system where the government is required to reply to petitions signed by at least 100,000 people in 30 days on a government-hosted portal called We The People.

Mr Obama, who was US president from 2009 to 2017, made the portal's source code publicly available in the hope that any government in the world can replicate his administration's efforts.

Following a temporary suspension, this portal was relaunched last year by the incumbent Donald Trump administration. However, it has been dormant since.

Here in Singapore, there is the perception that the authorities do not want to be seen as being dictated by pressure from petitions in crafting or changing policies, political observers told TODAY.

Govt’s position

In response to TODAY's queries, the Office of the Clerk of Parliament said parliamentary rules dictate that it only considers petitions with signatures that are dated and handwritten to ensure that they are not duplicated. These have to be accompanied by the signatory’s name and address. Also, the original copy of the petition printed on paper has to be submitted.

Petitions must also be “respectful in language” and “specific as to the nature of the relief sought”, the spokesman said.

“These procedural requirements help to ensure that a petition presented to Parliament is an authentic request from real and distinct individuals and is not abusive in nature,” he added. While it does not consider online petitions, MPs can raise them by filing a parliamentary question or proposing a motion for debate in the House, he noted.

In a 2016 parliamentary debate on the Administration of Justice (Protection) Bill, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam had drawn attention to how a petition opposing its contempt of court laws attracted almost 250 signatures. At the same time, there were surveys showing that a “vast majority of the population” supported the Bill.

Mr Shanmugam said then: “We have to make a judgment call on what public interest is. Even if people think something is not correct, we have the duty to go out and persuade and explain.”

Noting that public opinion could be skewed to galvanise support for a particular cause, he added: “If you go and tell people ‘you know your rights are going to be curbed, you know that democracy is under attack, do you know that the law substantially curbs your freedom’. If you say all those things and they do not read the Bill, of course, then they will get concerned.”

Then-backbencher Edwin Tong, who is now the Senior Minister of State for Law and Health, also pointed to the “completely unwarranted” fears raised by the same petition. “I would venture to suggest that such statements are alarmist and reveal a fundamental misunderstanding." Mr Tong had said.

In 2017, Mr Shanmugam said “public disquiet” was behind the strong support seen for an online petition calling on the Attorney-General’s Chambers to impose a harsher sentence on child sex offender Joshua Robinson. The petition eventually generated more than 79,000 signatures.

Later that year in response to a 40,000-strong petition over the case of waitress Annie Ee who died after daily beatings by her flatmates, Mr Shanmugam said: “As a society, we have to try and avoid putting pressure on judges to impose harsh/ lenient sentences.” Sentences “in any particular case” must not depend on how the public react, he stressed.

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) raised “security concerns” and cancelled the concert of Swedish black metal band Watain — a day after a 19,000-strong petition calling for its ban emerged.

Nevertheless. Mr Shanmugam made clear that the petition "per se did not influence the decision”. The viewpoints of senior clerics, MPs, and “people in the community” were also taken into consideration, he added.

The Government's decision later sparked four counter petitions calling on the authorities to reinstate the show, among other things.

It also spawned several spoof petitions, mocking Singaporeans' obsession with online petitions. They called for bans on American pop rock band Maroon 5, the Manchester United football team, video blogger Nas Daily, and local indie band The Great Spy Experiment, for example.

The people who started these petitions tried to link Maroon 5 and diabetes (the band has a song with the lyrics 'sugar, yes please"), as well as Manchester United and devil worship (the team is nicknamed the "red devils"). The others were called out for the "subliminal messages" which the petitioners claim they perpetuate.

In response to TODAY's queries on the Government's position on online petitions, an MHA spokesperson said that it generally remains "cautious" about treating petition as a reliable feedback mechanism "for obvious reasons".

Noting that the Government "does not rely solely on one channel" to ascertain public sentiments, she said: "Public sentiments is one of many factors we take into consideration when drafting policies. This can come through public consultation, individual emails, or other feedback channels such as REACH (the Government's feedback unit)."

Not always a number's game

While some have criticised online petitions as "slackivism", Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, calls them "a form of political expression and engagement (that) should not be discounted".

People's civic engagement is usually "not static" as it evolves with their life stages and social networks, she added.

Dr Soon also said that online petitions are based on what social movement researchers call "the logic of numbers" – as opposed to "the logic of damage", which involves the destruction of property and sit-ins that disrupt business and traffic.

In other words, the bigger the number, the more likely the cause would attract the attention of those whom the petitioners are targeting, which includes the Government.

"To a certain extent, online petitions are a numbers game," she said. "We have seen how online petitions which accumulate many signatures within a short period of time attract the policymakers' attention."

While MPs whom TODAY spoke to cautioned against being caught up in the numbers game, some also said the authorities should not always dismiss online petitions.

Mr Teo Ser Luck (Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency) told TODAY that policymakers should not be immediately "sceptical" and should instead "give a listening ear". "We may not want it to be, but the numbers do give you an indication of the interest in a segment of the public," he said.

For him, it is about separating the gems from the junk, or issues that “may not be perceived as substantial”. “The Government needs to decide if it (the petition) is real and substantial enough to represent the larger views and critical enough to review or act on it,” Mr Teo said.

Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) agreed, noting that “a lot of the public perception is now very binary, with a lot of yeses and nos” and policymakers should seek to find the middle ground before views in the society get even more polarised.

As for petitions that are backed up with facts, “as a government, I think we should listen (and) at least review what the petition is about. And I think that is what we are doing already,” he said.

Still, Mr Ng said he does not rely solely on petitions as a means of getting a sense of the ground.

“You really don’t know whether they (petitions) are real or fake,” he said. “Just like how there are a lot of trolls behind some of the Facebook comments we see.”

For Mr Ng, public or opinion polls conducted by consultancy firms are more valuable as they come with qualitative feedback too. “I think that is more powerful than a petition that has, say, 100,000 signatures,” he said.

There should not be a “magic number” before a petition could be taken seriously, he said. In September 2017, Mr Ng submitted a petition – signed by seven single parents – in Parliament, calling for a reform of the public housing policy for single parents. The petition was turned down in November.

Nevertheless, in March last year, the Government announced that divorcees could buy or own a subsidised flat immediately upon ending their marriage, rather than wait three years under previous rules. Reacting to the announcement at the time, Mr Ng called it a "good day for activism in Singapore".

It is rare for petitions such as the one Mr Ng submitted to result in legislative or policy change here. Other instances of petitions submitted, unsuccessfully, include Nominated MP (NMP) Kok Heng Leun’s petition in 2017 to seek an alternative location for the Sungei Road market, and NMP Siew Kum Hong’s petition in 2007 to Parliament for the repeal of Section 377A.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser noted: “Numbers do matter, but what is critical is whether it has a compelling argument that has resonance and can gather momentum.”

While both the UK and the US rely on a threshold to get issues on the Parliament agenda, lawyer Gregory Vijayendran warns of the fault lines that lie in adopting a numbers-based approach in a multi-racial and multi-religious society.

“If you take it to its extremes, devotees of a minority religion or a member of a minority race can never get the numbers. Does that mean that the item (proposed by them) should never be placed on the agenda?” said the senior counsel.

Guarding against rigged petitions

While petitions may raise important issues that warrant a response, some MPs still find it hard to take them seriously, considering the high-profile case of a 2016 online petition for a second Brexit referendum that was found to be rigged with some 77,000 signatures.

There are also concerns that there are no mechanisms to limit signatories of petitions on local issues to Singaporeans only, and to prevent a signatory from impersonating another person.

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Joan Pereira said: “We must know that online petitions do not represent all Singaporeans. Neither can we verify whether all who signed are legitimate individuals, nor do we know if they are foreigners who signed them hoping to disrupt the harmonious society we have here in Singapore.”

NMP Anthea Ong wondered if the online signatories are “merely keyboard warriors who may make ridiculous demands that get out of hand”, or “citizens who are genuinely passionate about the issue”.

Noting how petitions can be easily rigged with fake signatures created by bots and programming scripts that churn out counterfeit names, she said: “Some experts shared that one way of detecting rigging is when numbers jump sharply over a short period of time.”

“Wasn't there a sharp jump in 17,000 signatures over merely two days petitioning to ban a band in Singapore?,” she added, referring to the petition to ban Watain.

“If policymaking comes down to merely which petition has the larger number of signatures, we are in trouble,” she added.

Asked to respond to criticism that online petition platforms is not doing enough to guard against bots, Change.org spokesman David Barre said it currently relies on users to report suspicious activities. “We can’t monitor all petitions”, with tens of thousands coming through daily, he said.

This due diligence to detect malicious activities on the site is thus done “manually at the moment”, he added. As for double signatures, Mr Barre said only one signature is allowed per user account, and there are mechanisms to block double signatures.

An iPetitions spokesman told TODAY that it deploys security mechanisms to restrict fake and double signatures. These include internet protocol (IP) checks to prevent multiple signatures from the same or similar IP address, he noted, adding that its captchas help identify bots.

Commenting on its purpose as a tool for democracy, he said: “Most governments do not give official recognition to online petitions, but this does not mean that they do not have an important purpose to serve.”

Petitions can be an important indication of citizen sentiment, and can help government representatives identify and respond to issues that citizens care about, he said.

This is particularly true of the local government, he added, noting that most successful petitions occur at the grassroots level, where government representatives are closer to the everyday concerns of citizens.

As a means for consumers to get their grouses heard by private companies, in particular, “we find online petitions a highly effective way”, he noted.

Money talks louder

The advent of the Internet may have facilitated the collection of signatures but it does come at a price. The hosting sites support online petition for “free”, but solicit money from the petitions’ supporters.

Change.org, where most Singaporeans host their petitions on, is one such site. This created some confusion in the “Save Abang Driver GoJek Singapore”, where readers thought they were contributing to the driver, Mr Kamaruzzaman Abdul Latiff.

Mr Kamaruzzaman had posted on Facebook: “I was told that someone is collecting a US$4 donation on my behalf … Stop donating as I am not aware of this and never asked for any donation… Someone is trying to cheat you guys.”

But the “donation” notification is what every individual gets each time he or she signs a new petition.

It states: “Can you chip in US$4 to get this petition on the agenda?” A ticker beside the appeal shows that other signers have contributed US$20, US$29 or US$79.

The other options are: “No, I’ll share instead.” Or an inconspicuous one that states: “Sorry, I can’t do anything right now.”

If a user clicks yes, he will be hailed a “hero”, and told that every US$5 he spends will “advertise this petition” to 333 “extra people”, but the money does not go towards the cause. It goes towards the for-profit corporation running the platform – information which is not clearly stated.

If a user indicates no, the platform will prompt him to share the petition instead. Click “no” again, and he will see a screen of 10 petitions "that are building momentum” which might not be related to the cause which he had just signed for.

Then, the user will be faced with what looks like a swiping screen out of dating app Tinder. He can either “skip” or commit to petitions with a “1-Click Sign”, without having to read what cause he is supporting.

Petition starters who do not want their signatories to be faced with this “pay to promote” feature will have to write in to Change.org’s support team.

Mr Barre did not respond directly to concerns about the platform's methods, but he reiterated that the funds are used to boost the number of people who would see a particular petition.

“The more support a petition has, the more likely it is to reach their decision maker,” he added.

Mr Gilbert Goh, an activist who had created multiple online petitions calling for a minimum wage and for then-Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew to step down, among others, noted that the growth of what he calls a “petition culture” is a sign of a more active citizenry.

But the 57-year-old, who has staged several protests at the Speakers' Corner against various government policies, added that Singaporeans are merely turning from being apathetic to “being zealous in a passive and low-risk way”. “Petitioning is the most silent way to protest,” said the founder of Transitioning.org, a support site for unemployed individuals here.

Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan noted that most petitioners here do not expect concrete results, as they recognise how the Government operates.

Still, it is "desirable enough" for them to be able to argue and show that there is a certain depth of support for their cause.

“It is a form of self help by putting into the public domain one’s stand on a matter of public interest. Further, it conveys the narrative that ‘I am not the only one feeling this way; that the view is shared by hundreds or thousands of people’," he said.

As president of the Law Society of Singapore, Mr Vijayendran has occasionally become the recipient of online petitions — be they calls to investigate lawyer Lee Suet Fern’s alleged “conflict of interest” in the case involving the final will of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, or to investigate into family lawyers’ “unethical, dishonest and abusive tactics”.

These petitions “cut no ice” with him, as “might is not always right”, he pointed out.

“You can have one million all signing on a petition calling for an inquiry into something, but if the comments, complaints or allegations are vague and generalised, then to me, it is a vilification campaign,” he said.

“Do we want to have a virtual lynch mob? Is that the way we determine truth in society? Or do we want to be able to look at the objective facts and come to the conclusion.”

Mr Vijayendran added: “It is easy — the clickety-clack of the keyboard, and out comes an opinion — but if we sit down in a group setting and talk, would you say the same thing? I am not sure.”

The problem with most online petitions, he said, is that it places an over-reliance on rhetoric and emotive language that suspends rational thought. But “even the passionate issues can be analysed dispassionately”, he noted.

His tip for earnest petitioners? Craft something which is “not demagoguery, not manipulative, not propagandist, but is balanced, rational, can connect the dots as a matter of logic, and can also underline the emphasis of why that person needs to sign”.

After all, that was how someone like Mr Ierfan — or just a "university kid" when he put up his petition — got his voice heard.