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Negotiating Singapore's Meritocracy: A Subtle Shift?

By Nur Diyanah Binte Anwar

Synopsis

Recent debates on meritocracy have invited questions on what Singapore regards as 'merit'. There seems to be agreement to expand our understanding of the term to promote more equitability. Several concepts have emerged reflecting how meritocracy is evolving in the Singapore context, such as 'compassionate meritocracy', 'trickle up meritocracy' and 'meritocracy through life'.

Commentary

THE 50th anniversary of independence is an opportune time for Singaporeans to deliberate what they understand of the country today and its driving forces, including the idea of meritocracy. Described as a national doxa by some, or a set of core values and discourses taken as truth, meritocracy has been justified as a practice rewarding the hardworking and deserving with economic success and social mobility. The practice of meritocracy is said to have provided equal opportunities to all in a non-discriminatory manner, in Singapore's multicultural society.

Recent debates, however, have highlighted the side-effects associated with meritocracy in Singapore, which include a widening income gap and elitism. These issues raised largely revolve around how the term 'merit' - defined as a quality an individual possesses that is worthy of reward - should be understood and whether the effects of meritocracy are congruent with Singapore's desire to be an inclusive society. In this regard, these discussions illustrate how Singapore may be undergoing a subtle shift towards more equitability. While meritocracy has benefited Singapore thus far, it is now appears to be evolving according to Singapore's changing milieu.

Meritocracy well-accepted in Singapore

Meritocracy, as it has been practised in Singapore, largely rewards academically-inclined individuals. This includes being rewarded economically in the workforce and/or socially in terms of status, as academic excellence plays a large role in largely determining one's career trajectory.

However, the practice of meritocracy has been reviewed and commented on many fronts. Firstly, excessive emphasis on academic achievements may stigmatise the less academically-inclined.

Secondly, a widening income gap between the top and bottom earners of the society exists when rewards find more favour with the academically strong over the rest. As such, elitism amongst those who have succeeded in the system is also probable with stratification along educational achievements and class.

Thirdly, meritocracy may have also largely disregarded 'non-merit factors'. Professors Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr of the University of North Carolina used 'non-merit factors' to refer to circumstances that 'suppress, neutralise, or negate the effects of merit'. This can indemnify inequalities within society, such as having limited social capital or resources.

Markedly though, despite such comments, it would be simplistic to assume Singaporeans disagree with meritocracy. Meritocracy is indeed a cornerstone of Singapore's success. It would be more appropriate, however, to suggest meritocracy's negative effects have begun to unravel of late as new challenges develop within society. For example, meritocracy's non-discrimination principle – while still focused on impartiality by providing equal opportunities for all – should also acknowledge that the less fortunate, able or academically-inclined may not benefit as much within such a system.

As meritocracy necessarily rewards some over others, it may also embed perceptions of some being 'more equal than others' – despite assertions of non-discrimination and equal opportunities for all.

The recent emphasis to improve the schools', polytechnics' and the Institute of Technical Education's facilities and role are examples in paving the way towards expanding our understanding of 'merit'. Another instance is the positive messaging in the 2014 National Day Rally on the contributions of all sections of the Singapore society. Merit is but a principle that can be altered according to the changing needs of society.

Meritocracy: what now?

Several concepts have emerged recently from government leaders and academics exemplifying a renewed effort to contain and soften the negative effects of unchecked meritocracy.

Firstly, 'compassionate meritocracy', proposed by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and reaffirmed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong two years ago, recommends for Singaporeans who have benefitted from the system to contribute back to society and assist the less able and less fortunate. This can be regularly carried out through donations, skills-sharing, or spending time with those in need to encourage them to do better.

Secondly, 'trickle-up meritocracy' as suggested by academic Donald Low understands that government redistribution can still complement current practices of meritocracy. This can equalise the effects of non-merit factors by providing resources for less privileged Singaporeans. For example, scholarships for higher education can be offered to promising students who are identified specifically from less affluent backgrounds, to remove any financial worries and encourage continued learning. This would encourage them to properly develop his or her own merit, and provide better opportunities for them to compete.

Thirdly, the government, in a speech last year by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, has proposed 'meritocracy through life', for individuals to be evaluated throughout the different phases of their lives in their fields of endeavour. This allows more recognition for different niches, and would ensure that talents are measured on respective yardsticks accordingly as long as one works hard.

The establishment of the Skills Future Council is telling of this commitment; it encourages constant learning by integrating education, training and industry support for career advancement. These initiatives encourage a more holistic understanding of 'merit' – one which is beyond academic qualifications, with added emphasis on hard work and competition.

Moving in right direction

These concepts are steps in the right direction. They acknowledge the inequalities that may hinder some from thriving as much as others in an academically-driven meritocracy, and recognise that other niches should be developed to provide more opportunities for Singaporeans to compete.

A more equitable meritocracy would thereby benefit society more comprehensively – first, in providing conducive conditions for the less affluent or less able to compete on more equal grounds, and secondly recognising that there are some who are stronger and more inclined vocationally or in sports or arts, as there are those who are academically-inclined.

In all, there is a case to be made for Singapore's understanding of 'merit' to be enhanced. 'Compassionate meritocracy', 'trickle up meritocracy' and 'meritocracy through life' illustrate how meritocracy is evolving, aimed at equalising opportunities and reducing discrimination to suit a changing Singapore context.

This is pertinent, especially with Singapore's wish for a more inclusive society overall. Underlying it all is still the fundamental condition that the individual can succeed with hard work. This negotiation on meritocracy is pioneering in galvanising a thorough addressing of the issues affecting meritocracy thus far and should be supported.

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