IT OFFERS EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, NOT OUTCOMES

Understanding meritocracy

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In a recent Parliament session, Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Eugene Tan spoke extensively on the role of meritocracy in Singapore, reigniting a debate that has captured public interest in recent years. Long considered an integral part of the Republic's success and development, meritocracy has increasingly come under fire, with many claiming it has instead created inequality and elitism.

But do critics of meritocracy even understand what it means? Given the importance of meritocracy as a governing principle of Singapore, it is surprising we have not given it detailed study, often expecting it to produce or offer results that lie apart from its value system.

IT'S A PRINCIPLE, NOT A SYSTEM

Mr Donald Low, in the recent book Hard Choices — Challenging the Singapore Consensus, has identified meritocracy as “a core principle of governance in Singapore” and that it is “as close as anything gets to being a national ideology”.

Mr Low refers to the meritocracy principle as one in which “we try to equalise opportunities not outcomes, and we allocate rewards on the basis of an individual's merit or his abilities”. Everyone has an opportunity to succeed on the same tests and challenges, and the best is selected, regardless of who that person is.

Similarly, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong once described meritocracy as a “value system by which advancement in society is based on an individual's ability, performance and achievement”.

It is important we identify meritocracy as a principle rather than a system of government. Making this distinction allows us to examine the various facets of the system without attributing all of it to meritocracy. By extension, it also allows us to study the principle of meritocracy largely in isolation, without burdening it with systemic failures or successes.

Singaporeans often look at meritocracy as an ideology that offers social equality in Singapore. This explains why those unhappy with perceived inequality and limited social...
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mobility are blaming meritocracy for failing them. However, the meritocratic principle offers equal opportunities, not outcomes. Merit-based selection is based on the notion of non-discrimination: Blind to colour, creed and class.

The principle is largely unconcerned with inherent inequalities, a fact that has largely gone unnoticed in our celebration of meritocracy as a national ideology.

Instead, as noted by British author Matt Cavanagh, meritocracy is “less interested in giving everyone a chance to earn the right to a job” and more focused on “revealing” the ideal candidate. Hence, meritocracy is a principle of efficiency, not equality. It identifies the best cogs for a machine to ensure optimal efficiency.

Thus, when viewed as a principle of ensuring efficiency and unburdened with having to create equality, meritocracy is a fundamental basis for Singapore’s success.

Meritocracy has promoted a competitive environment by providing equal opportunities for a driven and ambitious populace to continually strive for excellence and success. This is what meritocracy as a principle should be judged on. As a governing principle, it has created a nation fixated on growth and development.

STRENGTHENING MERITOCRACY

What then of the social mobility that existed in Singapore in the post-independence era? Was not that too a success of a meritocratic system?

In truth, social mobility was essentially a positive by-product of the growth stimulated by meritocracy. Today, Singapore is a developed nation and competition at the top is fiercer than before. A large middle class is the result and upward social mobility is harder, though equality of opportunities has been largely unchanged. So clearly, this does not mean the meritocratic principle has failed. Rather, it shows that the system of governance needs to evolve beyond meritocracy to address inequality to a greater degree than before.

Recent government initiatives, such as the creation of the Early Childhood Development Agency to raise quality standards of early childhood programmes, are a good start. More can be done to create an integrated ecosystem of early childhood care and education in Singapore, so all children here have access to high-quality preschool education.

Apart from a focus on equality, the system needs to strengthen the application of meritocracy. To prevent elitism, there must be backward social mobility. Those who have succeeded cannot take it for granted.

The current system in Singapore, whether in the public or private sector, identifies individuals with high potential early and provides them with scholarships and opportunities. Employers must actively evaluate the development of these talents and ensure that they continue to grow and perform at a promising rate.

More importantly, the accelerated growth path accorded to these scholars should not inadvertently stifle the development of late bloomers who excel within certain fields.

Singaporeans must be given opportunities to succeed and excel at different levels to prevent stagnation or even degeneration. This will strengthen the meritocratic principle within the system, creating greater efficiency and productivity.

In his speech in Parliament, Mr Tan questioned if “another Singaporean family today, in the same position that (his) parents were in, would be able to see their life chances and those of their children improve in one generation”. This is a question that the system in Singapore must address and one that requires a systemic evolution within and beyond meritocracy.
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Singapore is a developed nation and competition is fierce. A large middle class is the result and upward social mobility is harder. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG