Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: Ideological Shifts in Singapore

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International Political Science Review 2008 29: 7
DOI: 10.1177/0192512107083445

International Political Science Review (2008), Vol. 29, No. 1, 7–27

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Abstract. The concept of meritocracy is unstable as its constituent ideas are potentially contradictory. The egalitarian aspects of meritocracy, for example, can come into conflict with its focus on talent allocation, competition, and reward. In practice, meritocracy is often transformed into an ideology of inequality and elitism. In Singapore, meritocracy has been the main ideological resource for justifying authoritarian government and its pro-capitalist orientations. Through competitive scholarships, stringent selection criteria for party candidacy, and high ministerial salaries, the ruling People's Action Party has been able to co-opt talent to form a "technocratic" government for an "administrative state." However, as Singapore becomes more embedded in the processes of globalization, it will experience new forms of national crisis, alternative worldviews through global communications technology, and a widening income gap, all of which will force its ideology of meritocracy to unravel.

Keywords: • Elitism • Global city • Ideology • Meritocracy • Singapore

Meritocracy has been a key principle of governance in Singapore, most visibly embodied in the civil service and the political leadership, whose upper ranks are filled mainly by the top performers in a highly competitive education system largely through "bonded" government scholarships (Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 55–6). However, the concept of meritocracy contains inherent contradictions that may, in practice, lead to the unraveling of Singapore's political society. Presently, there are already signs of tension as the main contradiction between meritocracy's egalitarian and elitist strands is gradually being amplified by Singapore's deepening engagement with the forces of globalization. As Singaporeans witness more frequent and serious episodes of national crisis, gain access to alternative ideas in cyberspace, and observe a widening income gap, the old consensus on meritocracy will have to shift and adjust in order to contain a new politics of disillusionment and resistance.

DOI: 10.1177/0192512107083445
Sage Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore)

Meritocracy in Singapore is not, therefore, just a myth or a fiction told by the dominant to trick the subordinate into unquestioning obedience. Instead, meritocracy is an ideology that, beneath the calm surface of politics in Singapore, is negotiated (even struggled over) as different classes and social forces attempt, amid changing circumstances, to forge an unavoidably contradictory consensus on how it might be meaningful for and beneficial to their own lives.

Inherent Contradictions in the Concept of Meritocracy

Meritocracy, as the rule of merit, may be conceived in a broad sense as a practice that rewards individual merit with social rank, job positions, higher incomes, or general recognition and prestige. The practice gives all potentially qualified and deserving individuals an equal and fair chance of achieving success on their own merit, which is usually a mixture of effort and talent, both innate and cultivated. Meritocracy, in this wider sense, points to merit as the rule or principle that governs how the economy, society, and politics are organized. In a narrower sense, the rule of merit refers simply to a political system that can select or produce the wisest and best to form a government: an "aristocracy of talent." In democratic elections, the people are given the power to decide what counts as "merit" and who possesses it.

Meritocracy's loosely coherent central features are themselves potentially contradictory. In their critique of the American "meritocracy myth," Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr (2004) identify four types of "merit": talent, attitude, hard work, and moral character. A merit-based selection is usually coupled with the principle of nondiscrimination: selection must be blind to race, gender, sexuality, age, or class differences. However, ignoring these differences may serve to deny their real influence on the prospects of candidates. Meritocracy, in trying to "isolate" merit by treating people with fundamentally unequal backgrounds as superficially the same, can be a practice that ignores and even conceals the real advantages and disadvantages that are unevenly distributed to different segments of an inherently unequal society, a practice that in fact perpetuates this fundamental inequality. In this way, those who are picked by meritocracy as having merit may already have enjoyed unfair advantages from the very beginning, ignored according to the principle of nondiscrimination.

If these relevant social differences are hidden beneath an uncritical, even celebratory, rhetoric of meritocracy (as blindness to differences), then the problem of securing equality of opportunity and a reasonably level playing field will be severely underestimated. One way to resolve the contradiction between the principles of nondiscrimination and equality of opportunity in an unequal society is to think of meritocracy as a competition with a clear "before" and "after." John Roemer (2000: 18) asserts that "before the competition starts opportunities must be equalized, by social intervention if need be, but after it begins individuals are on their own." To equalize the starting points, the state may have to intervene to remove external human constraints, restrictions, and discriminations that limit access to competition: a "negative freedom" component (Berlin, 1969). The state may also have to redirect resources (through welfare, education, and training policies and through social campaigns, for example) to those in society who are disadvantaged because they lack the environment and opportunities to support their talents and the will to self-mastery: a "positive freedom" component.

While it would seem reasonable to argue for a meritocracy that limits its concerns about equality of access and resources to the "before" stage of the competition, deciding on the exact "starting point" is not a simple thing to do in practice. Furthermore, even if the starting points could be identified and equalized, outcomes that clearly and consistently draw winners and losers from specific demographic categories should be taken as an indication that the system may not be functioning all that well. However, as Matt Cavanagh (2002) points out, there is another concept of meritocracy that is less interested in giving "everyone a chance to earn the right to a job" and more concerned about "revealing" the best person for the job. According to this concept, what matters is for meritocracy to serve as an efficient system that simply identifies individuals who have the right qualities that the positions require. In this sense, then, meritocracy is a mechanism for resource allocation: it is not a matter of ensuring nondiscrimination and equality of opportunity (a focus on fairness), but of finding the right persons for the job and paying them salaries that they deserve (a focus on outcomes).

But meritocracy is often seen to go beyond a simple process of sorting out talent. It is also valued for giving individuals the incentive to do the best that they can. Meritocracy promotes competition and competitiveness which can bring out the best in everyone. Human endowments are therefore developed to their potential through a fierce competition for jobs, material rewards, status, and prestige. Conspicuous signs of meritocratic success (wealth, possessions, and social mobility) can ignite ambitions to rise above one's station in life by working harder and more resourcefully than one might have otherwise.

This focus on efficiency and competition can easily obscure the egalitarian (nondiscrimination and equality of opportunity) aspects of meritocracy. In their discussion of the decline of egalitarianism in the USA, Kenneth Arrow et al. (2000) observe how American public perceptions have come to regard the poor as incapable of being economically productive and as fully responsible for their own conditions of poverty. Americans, according to them, have also become skeptical of public policy intervention and its ability to eradicate poverty and inequality. These historical developments further reinforce meritocracy's focus on efficiency and competition at the expense of nondiscrimination, equality of opportunity, and any comprehensive welfare policies driven by egalitarian ideals.

As a result, meritocracy is often an ideology of inequality; that is to say, a widely accepted belief about the "value" of inequality, held to be in the general interest, but mainly serving the interests of a particular segment of society, a fact that the belief actively obscures. Antonio Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony is a particularly useful tool for analyzing how the dominant classes in a capitalist state, supported by an "armor" of coercion that is rarely resorted to, assume moral leadership (reflecting their deeds as "a merit and a source of prestige") by actively and conscientiously working through their intellectuals and organizations in civil society to forge a national consensus among diverse classes and social forces (1971: 269). "Merit," as Amartya Sen (2000: 14) acknowledges, is normatively defined by "the preferred view of a good society." But the good society (and therefore its idea of merit) is in fact defined by meritocracy's winners and their organic intellectuals, who must actively promote their definition in order to gain widespread consensus and support. Control of this definition is vital to the control of future prospects for winning and staying in power.

Robert Klitgaard (1986: 1) discusses how meritocracy, "ostensibly anti-elitist," gets co-opted by the winners, who then become an elitist, "self-conscious, exploitative ruling minority" bent on perpetuating their power and prestige. Elitism sets in when the elite class develops an exaggerated "in-group" sense of superiority, a dismissive attitude toward the abilities of those who are excluded from this in-group, a heroic sense of responsibility for the well-being of what the in-group "laments" as the "foolish" and "dangerous" masses, and a repertoire of self-congratulatory public gestures to maintain what is sometimes merely a delusion of superiority. So "winners" will go on winning, and "losers" (believing that efficiency, competition, and meritocracy are in everyone's interest and that individuals must take personal responsibility for their fate in life) go on losing. All the while, the egalitarian aspects of meritocracy are further obscured. Meritocracy as an ideology of inequality also obscures how success often depends on factors other than individual merit, such as inheritance, marriage ties, social connections, cultural capital, opportunities arising from developments in the economy, and plain luck (McNamee and Miller, 2004). It obscures how institutions such as the education system can reproduce and reinforce class stratification and how people can be systematically and indirectly excluded from mainstream society, economy, and politics because of their race, gender, sexuality, age, and class.

Often confused with domination, Gramsci's hegemony is really an unending struggle, a dynamic "process of creating and maintaining consensus or of coordinating interests" within shifting relations of domination and subordination (Slack, 1996: 114, 117–18). As a complex articulation of often contradictory assertions and beliefs, hegemony is unstable and even fragile, making it a useful conceptual tool for analyzing how a consensus that is able to connect and contain the contradictory strands of meritocracy can just as easily be disarticulated with pressures from shifting circumstances and new consciousness. For example, when reward (the "prize" for winning the competition) surpasses the egalitarian aspects of meritocracy, the system may start to unravel. The winners, though initially convinced of their deservingness to win, may grow secretly diffident and begin to misdirect their energies on preserving their position by eliminating competitors and augmenting their own material rewards. A lack of focus and self-cultivation will lead to a depreciation of talent, and eventually the initial winners will become the wrong people for the job, as they spend most of their creative energies trying to convince the system that they are the right people for the job. Instead of bringing out the best in people, competitiveness (coupled with diffidence) may in fact bring out the worst: arrogance, self-centeredness, mistrust, desperation, vindictiveness, deceit, sabotage, and wastefulness. Furthermore, if the playing field is kept from being reasonably level, many talented people will not even be identified by the system, which (from an economistic point of view) can be a waste of resources. Conspicuously wide income and wealth gaps, instead of serving as an incentive, can breed a culture of resentment, futility, and disengagement among the system's losers, thus perpetuating their low status, heightening their sense of disenchantment and alienation, and igniting a politics of envy. The system's losers experience relative deprivation: relatively poor and weaned on the rhetoric of (equal opportunity) meritocracy, they believe that they deserve to have what the relatively rich have (Walker and Smith, 2001). Hegemony weakens, a more intense ideological battle erupts, and emergent social forces forge new alliances and movements with new value systems.

The contradictory tendencies within the concept and practice of meritocracy can make a society self-reflexive, energetic, and productive; but a society can also be torn apart if the contradictions are uncontainable. In Singapore's national discourse, meritocracy is regularly and straightforwardly advanced as the only viable principle for organizing and allocating the nation's scarce resources to optimize economic performance and political leadership within conditions of vulnerability and resource scarcity. Not only has the term "meritocracy" become enshrined and celebrated as a dominant cultural value in Singapore, it has also come to serve as a complex of ideological resources for justifying authoritarian government and its pro-capitalist orientations. However, as a principle that is intuitively appealing, but "essentially underdefined" (Sen, 2000: 5), meritocracy is a cluster of loosely coherent values and ideas that can become unstable and more clearly contradictory in moments of crisis. As Singapore attempts to transform into a global city more deeply embedded in the networks and flows of globalization, participating more integrally in their risks and potentialities, the idea of meritocracy has become increasingly unstable, contradictory, and contested, gradually losing its hegemonic ability to support coherently the needs of capitalism and the continued legitimacy of the authoritarian People's Action Party (PAP) government. As leaders have become more focused on questions of their reward, ordinary Singaporeans are becoming more conscious of socio-economic inequalities, the barriers to fair competition, and their divergent life chances in a global city that will find it much harder, or will have to find new ways, to describe itself as meritocratic.

Political Competition and Party Structure

The political leadership structure in Singapore corresponds rather well with a set of descriptions of modern politics attributed to Gaetano Mosca (Albertoni, 1987), who observed that there exists permanently in any complex society an organized minority called the political class, which imposes its will on the unorganized majority mainly through the use of a legitimizing "political formula" consisting of and expressing the body of values, ideas, and beliefs held in common by the rulers and the ruled. The idea of a political formula closely resembles Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony, although the latter emphasizes the "fought over" nature of such a formula. Mosca's political class is assigned to carry out all public duties, and, through these, controls and exercises state power over the unorganized majority who never really participate in government apart from voting in regular elections. The permanent ruling minority is, however, not static: its cohesion as a class often comes into tension with the need to recruit individuals from the ruled masses, who may themselves strive for inclusion. Criteria for recruitment have historically included social values such as military valor, birth, wealth, education, and individual merit. The latter two, predominant in modern societies and more closely associated with how meritocracy is now perceived, are mainly reflected in academic and professional qualifications. The need for recruitment into the political class establishes social mobility between the ruling minority and ruled majority that appears to be consistent with meritocracy.

The PAP government (authoritarian, technocratic, and paternalistic since it assumed power in 1959) is Singapore's "political class." It operates within a formal multiparty system in order for Singapore to qualify as a democracy, which

John Dunn (1993: 2) describes as the "moral Esperanto of the present nation-state system ... the public cant of the modern world." In practice, however, interparty competition has been virtually nonexistent and the PAP has entrenched itself as the dominant party in power for nearly half a century. As a formal democracy, Singapore's electoral system does not preclude a periphery of secondary or minor parties from contesting the PAP in periodically held popular elections in which voting is compulsory. In the 1968 general election, the PAP won all the seats in parliament, and continued to do so for three general elections subsequently. Since the 1981 by-election, parliament has seen at most four opposition members in any one parliamentary sitting. Other political parties in Singapore have come to think of themselves as permanent "opposition parties" whose aim is not to replace the PAP in government, but to contribute as many oppositional voices in parliament as possible. Moreover, they mostly believe that this is what the Singapore electorate wants: not another party to replace the PAP, but more parliamentary opposition to provide a check on the government.

Singapore's government is also deeply paternalistic, combining perfectionist ideals with soft-authoritarian methods. Technocrats are recruited by the PAP on the basis of academic and professional merit and, through the popular vote, given an overwhelming mandate to govern. Empowered by this mandate, the PAP government identifies the national interest in a thoroughly expansive manner, enforcing it on the people whose short-term interests, or perhaps ignorance of their "true" interests, may come into conflict with this. In other words, the PAP government believes it has a duty to force ordinary Singaporeans to be "free" of their base desires (a "positive" kind of freedom) and to do this by replacing "politics" with public administration. The political formula dictates that the government ultimately knows better, so that even with increasing consultation with the public, it must have the final say on everything from personal conduct to sexual behavior to artistic value. When, for example, Singaporeans registered their objection to the PAP government's policies by voting into parliament two opposition candidates in the 1984 general elections, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew publicly considered the possibility of modifying the one-man-one-vote system at the heart of modern democracy to correct for what he regarded as irrational voting behavior – democracy, to him, was acceptable as long as the outcomes left the PAP in government with a convincing mandate.

The PAP's claim to meritocracy is not, therefore, reflected in its approach to interparty competition, which is central to liberal democracy. Through its long incumbency, the PAP has secured important structural and tactical advantages such as effective control of the mass media, civil service, and para-political grass-roots networks. Therefore, the PAP will not be easily removed from power through democratic processes and neither, perhaps, could it be expected to make it "easier" for the opposition parties to challenge the PAP's dominance. But a meritocratic electoral process would need to be more adequately competitive to provide an incentive for the "best" people (regardless of social background, ideological inclination, and party affiliation) to come forward and serve as political leaders. The apprehension that has prevented many Singaporeans from coming forward through alternative political parties that better represent their political convictions would also need to be dispelled.

The PAP's arguments against competitive, multiparty politics are usually based on the idea that there is a scarcity of leadership talent in Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew

(1998: 315) vividly claimed that if "all the 300 [top civil servants and political elite] were to crash in one Jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate." More recently, he explained:

> Ideally we should have Team A, Team B, equally balanced, so that we can have a swap and the system will run. We have not been able to do this in Singapore because our population is only 4 million, and the people at the top, with proven track records not just in ability, but in character, determination, commitment will not be more than 2,000. You can put their biodata in a thumbdrive. (Elliott et al., 2005)

A multiparty or even two-party system, this argument goes, is a luxury that Singapore cannot afford since such a system would produce wasteful competition, as valuable resources are disaggregated and squandered through the various parties' efforts to outdo one another in order to win popular support. Goh Chok Tong (1985: 32–5, 1986: 9–11), then Deputy Prime Minister, argued that a competitive parliamentary democracy would make it extremely difficult for a party that wins by a small majority to form a ministerial cabinet of any quality. Goh (1986: 16) also argued against competitive multiparty politics from the angle of national stability and survival: "Britain is a supertanker. She can zig-zag, without capsizing. Singapore is a sampan. If we zig-zag, we would surely sink." Goh (1985: 2–5) believed that investor confidence, on which much of Singapore's economic success is built, is dependent upon political stability, which he characterized as continuous government by the PAP.

While the PAP's vision of meritocracy in government does not involve interparty competition, it is based on a concept of meritocracy as an efficient resource-allocating mechanism. If in a country whose current population is less than 4.5 million leadership talent is scarce, as the PAP keeps insisting, then meritocracy must serve to "reveal" the best people for government, and it should do this from the widest possible pool of talent. Although relentlessly elitist in its recruitment of parliamentary candidates where qualifications and achievements are concerned, the PAP has maintained that its candidates come from all walks of life. To legitimize its choices, meritocracy must demonstrate not only that the "best" are chosen, but also that the "best" can be drawn from any social background. Ideologically at least, this would help to convince Singaporeans not only that scarce leadership resources are being properly utilized, but also that the search for leadership talent is non-discriminatory and prospective talents enjoy equality of opportunity. For this reason, PAP politicians often give accounts of their humble origins. For similar reasons also, individual achievements in the racial minority groups are regularly showcased in the mass media as spectacular evidence of a meritocratic society.

The PAP is stratified into an upper and lower echelon. The upper echelon (comprising the party's Central Executive Committee [CEC], cabinet ministers, and parliamentarians) is collectively analogous to the philosopher-kings of Plato's *Republic*, and the CEC to the "nocturnal council" of his *Laws* (Cotton, 1993: 12–14). The political formulas propagated by them constitute the main components of a Platonic "noble myth" among which the notions of meritocracy and "good governance" have been prominent. Party cadres, whose number is estimated at approximately 1000 and whose membership is secret and determined by the CEC alone, are in turn responsible for electing the members of the CEC, thereby securing the committee's pre-eminent position and the support of the

rest of the party for policies implemented by the cabinet (Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 41). It is the cabinet ministers who wield, through the CEC (17 out of its current 18 members are also government ministers), ultimate power over and above ordinary members of the PAP, its "backbench" parliamentarians, and any of its members who may take a contrary position on certain issues.

The "grassroots sector" (the lower echelon) is made up mostly of branch activists and ordinary members who have been useful as the eyes and ears of top PAP leaders. Their authority rests not so much on academic and professional accomplishments as on seniority, experience, charisma, and common-sense wisdom, qualities that help to present to ordinary Singaporeans the PAP's "human face" that softens the harshly technocratic and elitist government machinery. Their importance, however, appears to be diminishing, as many of their functions have been delegated to the more technocratic civil service and more recently to voluntary welfare organizations that are increasingly being run according to social enterprise principles (Yu-Foo, 2006). In this sense, a meritocracy that defines merit almost exclusively in terms of educational and professional qualifications and commercial success has made the traditional PAP-controlled grassroots sector seem much less relevant and effective in contemporary public life, a situation that may breed discontent among loyal grassroots activists who increasingly feel betrayed by their political masters.

Ordinary Singaporeans who join the PAP with ambitions of rising through the party ranks to attain real political position, power, or prestige are mostly frustrated: Diane Mauzy and R.S. Milne (2002: 42) observe that 20 percent of the PAP's 81 parliamentarians in 1999 had been members of the youth wing. When it comes to fielding candidates for elections, the PAP recruits top achievers directly from the civil service, military sector, legal and medical professions, academia, and business community. These are not usually members of the PAP in the first instance, but are co-opted into the party once identified and selected, a practice that causes some quiet resentment within the PAP rank and file. However, the shared desire to keep the party in power at all costs overrides internal pressures to fracture along the clear line dividing the upper and lower echelons (Chan, 1975: 59–61). Minister George Yeo's call to the PAP to "remain true to its origins as a mass movement, inspiring and uniting all segments of our society regardless of race, language, religion, intelligence, age or gender" (Young PAP, 1996: 4) registers the PAP's concern for the interests of the masses (and surely for its ability to secure their votes), while sustaining the belief that these interests must be rationally identified for the masses by talented Singaporeans elected on a party ticket.

As a political party, the PAP has been useful for mobilizing and surveilling constituents; providing manpower and informational and logistical support; and serving as a machine to legitimize at grassroots level all government decisions and the election to parliament of an aristocracy of talent. Decades of PAP rule, however, have turned the focus of the party's heroic and idealistic founders to the more strictly governmental concerns of an administrative state, so that Chan Heng Chee's (1985: 160) description of the PAP as a "party [that] has lost its role altogether in giving direction to society," one in which the CEC acts only as a rubber stamp for government decisions, may not be far off the mark. Similarly, Khong Cho-Oon (1995: 118) has described a shift to "a nonparty system in the sense that no political party, not even the ruling one, plays a decisive political role today."

The government's efforts to open up more direct channels of communication with the public also reduce the significance of the party. James Cotton (1993: 10–11) observes that the "party has ... become a shell, a convenient electoral machine for maintaining in office an elite which is ultimately self-selected, self-promoted and self-defined ... Lee Kuan Yew ... will remain at the centre of the network of patronage which the party exists to legitimize."

Technocratic Leadership for an Administrative State

An inspection of the PAP's choice of parliamentary candidates (and particularly of those appointed to the cabinet[1]) will reveal that the "merit" that matters most to the party is the kind signaled by professional expertise and academic qualifications. The PAP leadership works hard to renew itself by putting together a team not of charismatic political and ideological mobilizers, but of largely English-speaking, overseas-educated technocrats with strong administrative, professional, academic, technical, and commercial backgrounds (Bellows, 1989: 205; Sai and Huang, 1999: 158–68). For example, the 1997 slate of MPs consisting of 24 new "third-generation" leaders were described by Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister, as "the best since the PAP first fielded candidates in 1955" (Fernandez, 1996). All 24 were graduates and eight had received prestigious government scholarships for undergraduate studies (mostly overseas). Out of the eight, three had received president's scholarships, the most prestigious of these awards. Noticeably, a number of them were described as having emerged from humble backgrounds and many expressed a moral obligation to repay society by serving as political leaders (Da Cunha, 1997: 19–22).

The PAP conceives of its meritocratic practice mainly in terms of technocratic government, since the problems faced by modern societies are technical and complicated in nature, requiring specialized knowledge for effective policy-making. A proficient and bureaucratic elite made up of professionals and specialists, therefore, is what the PAP believes Singapore needs to survive and prosper. Led by the ministers, the civil service (an important recruitment ground for PAP politicians) has become the main artery of initiating, formulating, and implementing policies and of institution-building for development and growth. As the bureaucracy of a highly paternalistic government, the civil service rationalizes, regulates, and shapes (behind closed doors) nearly all major aspects of life in Singapore. A civil service that appears to take the politics out of policy-making is a central feature of Singapore's image as an administrative state (Chan, 1975), depoliticizing, bureaucratizing, and limiting much of the participatory decision-making and contestations at the core of most democracies, and expelling or else hiding under layers of technocratic rhetoric overt questions of ideology and the party political. With many administrators typically trained as engineers, systems engineers, and mathematicians, public administration has, it would seem, been regarded as more of a science than an art (Seah, 1985: 110). In writing about Singapore as a small country with "big lessons," Hilton Root (1996) highlights Singapore's politics-free, accountable, and corruption-free civil service.

However, its claim to pragmatism (which translates to "no ideological allegiance") is itself an ideological position that obscures the pro-capitalist orientations of an authoritarian government. With numerous statutory boards and government-linked companies (GLCs) dominating the local economy, Singapore is a country run like

a corporation. More than S$150 billion of foreign reserves are invested in overseas projects by the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), whose board is chaired by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and deputy chaired by Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong (Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, 2007). Temasek Holdings, in 2002, had invested most of its S$70 billion in approximately 40 major companies, which constitute a quarter of Singapore's market capitalization (Rodan, 2004: 54). Currently, the "Asia investment house headquartered in Singapore" manages a S$160 billion portfolio of investments, mainly in Asia (Temasek Holdings, 2007). Garry Rodan (2004) notes how, in spite of corporate and fiscal transparency reforms which the government itself initiated after the 1997 Asian economic crisis in line with the neo-liberal reform agenda, GIC, Temasek, and other GLCs continue to be shielded from public and, in the case of GIC, even parliamentary scrutiny. In a study of the structure of GLCs in the early 1990s, Werner Vennewald (1994) observed a high concentration of control in the hands of a small number of permanent secretaries, the powerful civil service chiefs who tend to hold multiple and interconnected directorships of various public-sector bodies and committees. Although Ross Worthington (2003) notes how this concentration shifted to a "more distributed leadership style" in the late 1990s, he is still able to identify a group of dominant individuals "overwhelmingly from the public sector," and concludes that state–society relations in Singapore are "elitist and oligarchic" with community organizations, trade unions, and industry associations negligibly represented in GLCs.

In the administrative state, top civil servants, in practice at least, wield more power and influence than ordinary backbench parliamentarians who, by democratic convention, represent the sovereign will of the people. Statutory boards, for example, are required to present their financial statements and annual reports to parliament, but, as Thomas Bellows (1989: 206–10) observes, parliament "has scant oversight over the statutory boards, with little supervision or even awareness of many decisions undertaken by civil servants, except in cases of glaring mismanagement." Limiting national decision-making to a small elite class of technocrats has been justified in terms of modern governance being too complex for mass participation. However, it might also be argued that the multifaceted nature of modern governance means that a government cannot afford to restrict its problem-solving capabilities to a limited technocratic elite whose horizons might similarly be too limited to solve complex problems and whose solutions might be restrained by groupthink. Drawing decision-making talent from a broader cross-section of ordinary Singaporeans might be a more effective means of obtaining a multi-perspective understanding of increasingly globalized national problems and more creative ideas to solve them. Such conditions of increasing epistemic and practical uncertainties call for a healthy skepticism of any single group of persons claiming to hold the monopoly on wisdom and having immense power to act upon it. Insisting that PAP government decisions are the best possible ones generates a false sense of security and a general feeling that there is no need to keep a watchful eye on the daily business of government. Such conditions open the way to serious mistakes and corrupt practices in the future.

The PAP government is popularly perceived, even by its many admirers, as arrogant, insensitive, compassionless, and convinced of its own superiority, what Ezra Vogel (1989: 1053) calls a "macho-meritocracy." Vogel also observes how meritocracy emits an "aura of special awe for the top leaders ... [which] provides a basis

for discrediting less meritocratic opposition almost regardless of the content of its arguments." In fact, there are strong disincentives against talented Singaporeans "straying" into opposition camps, and the very character of leadership merit is not itself allowed to become the subject of electoral contest. As the long-time political winners, the PAP has been able to define merit in Singapore's politics and, in this way, influence strongly the people's understanding of who deserves to win. Through higher monetary deposit requirements and increasingly stringent qualifying criteria for various elected positions in government, the PAP has also been able to influence the question of who can afford and qualify to stand for elections.

Furthermore, there seems to be a widening rift developing between the government and ordinary Singaporeans (what novelist Catherine Lim [1994] has described as a "great affective divide"), which, if this results in inflexible policies that antagonize most Singaporeans most of the time, could erode the PAP government's political legitimacy, even if it continues generally to deliver material goods. Lim (1994) notes how "the main criticisms levelled against the PAP point to a style deficient in human sensitivity and feeling – 'dictatorial,' 'arrogant,' 'impatient,' 'unforgiving,' 'vindictive'." Veteran journalist Seah Chiang Nee (2006) observes how only "a few newer MPs are social workers or people with good community links, but compassion, charity and humility generally rank low in priority in a candidate's qualities."

Recruiting and Retaining Talent: Scholarships and Salaries

Lamenting what he perceived to be a relatively low entry requirement for politicians, Goh Chok Tong (1985: 35) observed how "You have to be trained over a long period to be an economist, a doctor, or a lawyer ... Should we not insist on similar training and certification for those who look after our countries and our lives?" One way in which the PAP government has secured near-exclusive access to a pool of highly "qualified" talent has been through a system of prestigious and highly competitive government scholarships. Through a very thorough process of high-powered interviews and written tests, scholars with the "right" thinking, attitude, and character are selected from a pool of candidates with top examination results and notable extracurricular achievements. These scholarships are among the most tangible of meritocratic instruments in Singapore. The most prestigious scholars pursue degrees in well-known overseas universities and their subsequent contribution to society is secured mainly through a legal-contractual obligation (known as a "bond") to work in a public-sector body for a period of six to eight years typically. The government is expected to provide scholars who have returned with rewarding and challenging careers, particularly in the elite Administrative Service.

The scholarship bond is presented as more than a legal contract. As Singapore's future leaders, scholars are expected to have the moral responsibility and integrity to honor their contracts. Former top diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (2005: 5) reflects on how his own life chances have clearly benefited from the scholarship system:

> In my life, I have lived the meritocratic dream ... Through unusual good fortune, Singapore had remarkably wise leadership upon independence in 1965. These leaders decided that Singapore's only resources were human resources. None

> should be wasted. Any talent anywhere in society would have an opportunity to grow and flourish. Hence, with financial aid and scholarships, and through a merit-based promotion system, I escaped the clutches of poverty.

While a scholarship brings opportunity, honor, and prestige to the recipient, terminating (or "breaking") a bond, the government believes, should bring dishonor and shame, beyond the straightforward requirement of paying damages for nonperformance.

In the 1990s, as Singaporean families became more affluent and as scholars became more aware of their earning potential beyond the context of Singapore, the practice of bond-breaking became more common. For instance, the local newspapers reported how government scholar Hector Yee, while still an undergraduate in 1998, wanted to break his bond because he believed he could not "deprive the world of the potential benefits that can be derived from my research." Philip Yeo, then-chairman of the Economic Development Board, decided publicly to shame bond-breakers by publishing their names. When a PAP MP challenged Yeo's decision, the influential senior civil servant brazenly asked him to resign his parliamentary seat for advancing such a view. To resolve this embarrassing situation, then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (1998) described Yeo's words as inappropriate, but agreed with him that scholarships are not academic prizes, education bursaries, or general education subsidies. They are instead public funds spent on training promising Singaporeans to take up leadership or specialist roles in the public sector.

In 2005, another disgruntled bond-breaker, Chen Jiahao, used his blog site to criticize the high-profile Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) for the way it managed its prestigious research scholarship awards, suggesting that the agency was corrupt in dealing with overseas universities. Its chairman, Philip Yeo, threatened to sue Chen for libel unless he retracted the remarks and apologized. Chen complied, but went further and closed down his blog site, a move that made him look like the victim of Yeo's bullying, particularly within the increasingly politicized Singapore blogosphere (*The Straits Times*, 2007). Clearly, the way that scholarships are being administered and its underlying principles are increasingly being challenged by less "needy" and more politically savvy scholars with international horizons.

Other critics, and notably even a PAP MP, have argued that through these scholarship schemes, the civil service has effectively hoarded talent for government at the expense of regenerating the private-sector economy, which needs just as much managerial and entrepreneurial talent for Singapore to succeed as a knowledge-based economy. In a country where human resources are limited, meritocracy has drawn the best talents into the civil service (Singapore's largest employer) and then into politics and government, often via the PAP, leaving the private sector thin on managerial and entrepreneurial talent. Successful people in the private sector are also often invited mid-career into politics via the PAP.

However, the bond-breaking trend may be an indication that talented Singaporeans are seeing for themselves a wider and more challenging range of career options than Singapore's public sector can offer, and not only in the private sector, but also in the international job market where salaries are many times more attractive. According to these sorts of arguments, it is no longer reasonable for contemporary Singapore to expect its talented citizens to choose politics and government as a career out of a sense of passion and altruism, since

the opportunity costs of such a choice will continue to rise. For instance, as Goh Chok Tong (1985: 33) pointed out, "multinationals can pay for the best board of directors in the country." To attract talented Singaporeans into government and be able to retain them also requires some kind of "compensation" not only for the loss of income from alternative career options, but also for the less attractive aspects of public life such as the high stress levels of being responsible for the entire nation's well-being, the loss of privacy in what is really a very small country, a deterioration in the quality of private (including family) life, and the challenges of living up to what are sometimes unreasonably stringent standards of behavior.

Even if the PAP could continue to attract the best minds in the country for parliament and the cabinet, what would ensure that future members of the government will not resort to corruption and destructively self-interested behavior, given the tremendous powers that they will wield? When a minister or parliamentarian was found to have been corrupt, an almost ritual cleansing was performed in public to purge away the infected elements and renew public confidence in the government. National Development Minister Teh Cheang Wan, for example, was driven to suicide when the government revealed that he was suspected of receiving bribes (Quah, 1988: 242–4). But more needed to be done to discourage corrupt practices in the first place.

The PAP government's controversial solution to the problem of incentive, compensation, and corruption was to peg ministerial and upper-level civil service salaries to a "market rate," a solution that was in 1994 swiftly passed into legislation. Ministers' salaries have since been pegged at two-thirds of the median salary of the 48 highest-earning professionals in the fields of banking, law, accountancy, and engineering and of executives in multinational and manufacturing companies. These public-sector salaries, seemingly disproportionate to Singapore's size and limited resources, would make Singaporean ministers and top civil servants by far the highest paid in the world. Currently, the prime minister's S$3.1 million salary is approximately five times that of the US president (Reuters, 2007). These extreme measures, motivated not primarily by greed, but by an innovative government's faith in the market, sensitivity to the new public management literature, and confidence in its own correctness, have been possible to push through in an authoritarian system in which any real resistance to them would not find legitimate platforms. As with all extreme measures, unmoderated by a larger, more democratic, set of viewpoints and arguments, the unintended consequences can also be extreme. The idea that money will draw the "best" people into politics and give them fewer reasons to be corrupt ignores the possibility of people going into politics for the "wrong" reasons: the lure of personal prestige and monetary gain can produce a dangerously intelligent and self-interested class of political elites who will readily compromise the national interest to satisfy their own needs and who will have the unchecked power to do this indefinitely. Governance in Singapore is precariously built upon faith in good and wise men rather than good and wise institutions.

Globalization and the Unraveling of Meritocracy

In the 2006 general election, the PAP won 66.6 percent of votes and 82 out of 84 seats in parliament. The results gave the PAP a strong mandate to continue in government and they reflect, despite structural disadvantages faced by opposition

parties in the dominant party system, a hegemonic consensus on the value of its technocratic, paternalistic, pragmatic, and meritocratic mode of government. But the maintenance of hegemony, as discussed earlier, requires continuous ideological work, particularly as changing circumstances lead to new experiences of material disadvantage and the emergence of alternative consciousness. While the election results may signal continued majority support for the PAP to be in government, it may not reflect full support for the PAP government's policies and approval of its public image. As Singapore becomes more deeply embedded in the networks and flows of globalization, for example, the inherent contradictions in the aspiring global city's concept and practice of meritocracy becomes more pronounced and its legitimizing role is slowly being compromised.

With greater exposure to a world characterized as risky and unpredictable, Singapore has had to face old and new types of crisis, and to experience them more frequently. To maintain faith in the government's ability to lead Singapore out of crisis, which is a fundamental facet of its legitimacy, more intense and skillful ideological work has had to be performed. The state-directed mainstream media, for instance, helped the government to explain the 1997 Asian economic crisis as a concrete example of how Singapore's fundamentally sound economy, shaped by wise government policies, carried it through difficult times. The crisis was also presented as an opportunity for restructuring the economy. Soek-Fang Sim interviewed 32 Singaporeans in 1997–98 and concluded that:

> The PAP was so ideologically successful that its citizens, *despite* believing that the crisis was "regional" and thus beyond the PAP's control, also believed that the PAP was the only option to lead Singapore out of the economic storm. This is a remarkable feat because it is tantamount to an ideological short-circuit: if the crisis is regional and beyond the control of the state, how can it be conquered by the PAP or by any government? Not surprisingly, the converse question of "if the government is so good, why did the crisis happen" was a thought that none of my interviewees articulated. (Sim, 2006: 153)

Ordinary Singaporeans were persuaded to rally around their government and to endure the hardships that were necessary for Singapore to remain attractive to foreign capital. A small global city that assumes deeper integration with the global network and flows will experience more frequent and perplexing economic crises, and its government may not be able to sustain the people's good faith and willingness to make prolonged sacrifices for their economy, particularly as the wealth and lifestyles of the elite become more conspicuous. Difficult ideological work has been carried out just to persuade the Singapore workforce, including retrenched workers in restructured GLCs, that their pain and sacrifices have been shared equally. Natural disasters and the global transmission of disease have further complicated the hegemonic work of securing political legitimacy. A government whose authority and popular support are based firmly on its capacity to protect the nation against threat and deliver material success for its citizens will find it much more challenging to secure the people's confidence as they start to question the meritocratic processes that have brought together a government that, in the face of complex and less solvable global problems, will seem to be much less infallible than they had previously believed.

Second, globalization creates new spaces for civil society, internationalizing the resources and opportunities for raising political consciousness, networking

among activists, and developing a repertoire of techniques for mounting resistance. As a global city, Singapore is one of the most wired countries in the world. Regardless of media restrictions and censorship practices, information and communications technology provide ultimately uncontrollable access to a myriad of alternative sources of information based inside and outside Singapore. Through encounters with alternative political websites, the disadvantaged and the disenchanted learn to articulate their condition in ways that the official discourse of meritocracy has excluded. Even though the government has attempted to impose traditional media restraints on what Cherian George (2006) describes as "contentious journalism" in cyberspace, a quick visit to the numerous blog sites, discussion lists, and alternative news sites will quite readily reveal an array of viewpoints, often forcefully made, that range from reading "against the grain" of official rhetoric to accusing the government of wrongful behavior. Political bloggers interviewed by Dorothy Tan (2006) claimed that they did not practice self-censorship and that the panoptical strategy of "big brother watching" has failed to produce the effect of auto-restraint.

Third, globalization will cause a deeper stratification of Singaporean society into the haves and the have-nots (or the "have-less"). Lee Kuan Yew declared Singapore a "middle-class society" in 1987, estimating 80 percent of the population to be "middle class" (Rodan, 1996: 30). This assertion of "classlessness" in Singapore could not be sustained: Lee Hsien Loong (2000) had to admit to a widening income gap as highly mobile professionals and well-qualified Singaporeans competed for and commanded First-World salaries internationally, while less mobile unskilled and semiskilled Singaporeans had to compete with low-waged workers from the surrounding region. Furthermore, the majority of workers who were retrenched as a result of the 1997 Asian economic crisis were lower-skilled Singaporean workers and they were generally the hardest hit by the crisis (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2000). From 1997 to 2005, the lowest 20 percent non-retiree households experienced a general decline in their household incomes (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2007). The Singapore Department of Statistics (2002) reported that the income distribution, which had been relatively stable from 1990 to 1998, widened after 1999. The Gini coefficients among employed households for each of the years from 2000 to 2006 were 0.442, 0.455, 0.455, 0.458, 0.463, 0.468, and 0.472 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2007). The widening income disparity was explained as a "reflection of globalization and Singapore's transition into a knowledge-based economy," comparing it to similar experiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and the USA (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002). A global survey of salaries by Robert Walters, an international recruitment agency, pointed to "booming salaries" for professionals in the banking and finance, human resources, information technology, sales and marketing, and supply chain management sectors (Loh, 2007). Even so, middle-income Singaporeans are regularly heard complaining that the government's openness to "foreign talent" has reduced their prospects in their own country, as "second-rate" foreigners are perceived to be given perks and unequal career advancements.

Even though the lowest 10 percent of households "are not necessarily poor" in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002), just the perception of a widening income gap between the classes can produce strong feelings of relative deprivation. Amid the highly visible inequalities, their discontent and anger can produce greater pressure for state welfare, which the PAP government

has been demonizing for decades (in spite of its own socialist origins) arguing that "cradle-to-grave" welfare leads to a crutch mentality and a disincentive to work. Comprehensive state welfare is also viewed by the government as an unproductive drain on national reserves. Goh Chok Tong (1988: 5) called on Singaporeans to "encourage enterprise and reward success, not envy and tax them." To sustain a pro-business environment, the government has had to rely on voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) within civil society to look after the disadvantaged and adopt good "social enterprise" practices. Opposition politician Chee Soon Juan (1994: 70–88) has referred to the PAP outlook as an "upside-down" philosophy of government which advocates a huge government presence in the economy while leaving protection of the needy to private citizens, instead of leaving business to private individuals and taking up the moral responsibility of looking after the poor and elderly. Increasingly coming under stress, the government's antiwelfare stance shifted very modestly in 2007 with the introduction of the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme to top up the salaries of workers over 35 years of age and earning S$1500 or less. However, with only a still basic framework of welfare provision, more Singaporeans born into relatively disadvantaged families will not find claims about equality of opportunity and upward mobility all that believable, and they may withdraw from the system. From a resource-allocation point of view, this will constitute a waste of potential talent where talent remains scarce.

In the 1990s, Liew Kim Siong (1994: 54) predicted that "the welfare question will dominate the next stage of Singapore's development, as the citizens of this got-rich-quick nation try to imagine a sense of community." In recent years, a number of incidents have brought the income divide sharply to the foreground. First, the public learnt that T.T. Durai, chief executive officer of a famously successful charity organization, the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), was earning S$600,000 a year and enjoying such perks as first-class air travel. Through regular high-profile television fundraisers, the foundation was able to move the mainly Chinese-speaking working-class audience to donate generously to help kidney patients afford their expensive treatments. Kind-hearted Singaporeans were outraged not only by the discovery that only 10 percent of their donations went to kidney patients, but also by the somewhat cavalier description by the organization's patron (and wife of Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong) of Durai's salary as mere "peanuts."

The "political parallels" between the foundation and the PAP government have not gone unnoticed (Au, 2005). Seah Chiang Nee (2005), for instance, notes how Durai's example "calls into question Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's argument that high government salaries would prevent corruption. His rationale is that if a person is very well paid, he will not be tempted by greed." The NKF scandal has made Singaporeans more cynical about the establishment: the PAP government needed to distance itself from the image of an arrogant, self-serving, crony-supported, and highly paid CEO of a dominant charity organization who has been found guilty of corruption. And yet, still within the shadow of the NKF, the government went ahead in full technocratic mode to call for a raise in ministerial salaries (less than a year *after* an election victory in 2006), a move that drew criticism from ordinary Singaporeans who had been hit by a recent increase in consumption tax (a regressive tax). To assure Singaporeans that the move was not motivated by greed and insensitivity toward relatively poorer members of society,

the prime minister made an extraordinary promise to donate his pay rise of S$600,000 to charity for the next five years (Reuters, 2007).

In 2006, Wee Shu Min, an overachieving 18-year-old scholarship recipient in an elite junior college, posted a blog entry that sharply criticized a 35-year-old man, Derek Wee, for blogging about job security and prospects for older workers in Singapore:

> i am inclined – too much, perhaps – to dismiss such people as crackpots. stupid crackpots. the sadder class ... we are a tyranny of the capable and the clever, and the only other class is the complement ... if you're not good enough, life will kick you in the balls ... my future isn't certain but i guess right now it's a lot brighter than most people's. derek will read this and brand me as an 18-year old elite, one of the sinners who will inherit the country and run his stock to the gutter. go ahead. the world is about winners and losers ... dear derek is one of many wretched, undermotivated, overassuming leeches in our country, and in this world. one of those who would prefer to be unemployed and wax lyrical about how his myriad talents are being abandoned for the foreigner's ... please, get out of my elite uncaring face.

Her comments provoked a slew of heated responses in cyberspace, mostly criticizing her insensitivity, immaturity, and starkly elitist views, but also her privileged background. The fact that her father was a president of a government-linked company and a PAP MP (who came out in support of the basic principle of his daughter's views) and that her own qualifications suggested a future career in the political elite drew the attention of Singaporeans to a larger connection between snobbery and elitism in government. This realization was especially stark in the context of another episode in the news that happened roughly the same time: a jobless man, unable to make ends meet, jumped to his death leaving behind his wife and children. Seah Chiang Nee (2006) predicts that this episode will "threaten the PAP's long-term rule" since it highlights "political elitism and arrogance" that breed "resentment and friction." A Singapore more starkly divided along class lines will be hurled into a politics of alienation, resentment, and envy, as the contradictions of globalization continually dislocate the ideals, practices, and legitimating functions of meritocracy in Singapore.

A Future Scenario?

Globalization is widening the income gap in Singapore, which in turn makes social divisions much more pronounced, provoking a range of emotive responses particularly from the relatively deprived. The least advantaged in society, long deprived of comprehensive welfare programs to level the playing field, are beginning to disbelieve the promises of upward mobility and, with greater access to alternative views mainly from the Internet, are less inclined to blame themselves for their own misfortune. The government, increasingly nervous about the electoral impact of an emerging class of Singaporeans who "feel" poor, has been more strongly reliant on the social enterprise efforts of voluntary welfare organizations and is also making gingerly attempts to introduce state-run welfare programs for the disadvantaged such as the Workfare Scheme. To ordinary Singaporeans, the widening income gap and the conspicuous lifestyles of wealthy and elite Singaporeans as well as the

expatriate class of "foreign talent" are making equality of opportunity seem like a naive expectation that can no longer advance beyond mere platitude.

As the economic and political elite are rewarded (or are rewarding themselves) with larger prizes, a vast and visible inequality of outcomes will replace the incentive effect with a sense of resentment, helplessness, social disengagement, and even envy among those who perceive themselves as systematically disadvantaged. As the elite class endeavors to renew itself, defining merit in its own image, it will become increasingly narrow, exclusive, and dismissive toward others, losing the benefit of a broader range of less traditional talent. As talented Singaporeans (bonded or not) continue to calculate carefully the opportunity costs of a career in politics and public administration in Singapore, the focus will continue to be on the question of reward. As public-sector careers become more lucrative, civil service and ministers' salaries will mutate from a politically courageous (and somewhat extreme) public-sector innovation to attract and retain talent for making good policies that reflect the real needs, interests, and common good of Singaporeans into a preoccupation with staying in power mainly for the money and achieving this through image politics, vote-buying, and so on.

In fact, Singapore's meritocratic system has been practiced so extremely that it is starting to show signs of becoming a victim of its own success: unintended consequences may, in the near future, take off on sharp tangents as the unsettling power of globalization disarticulates the inherent contradictions in the meritocracy concept itself, mainly between its egalitarian and its elitist dimensions. This article has not argued that the concept and practice of meritocracy have already unraveled in Singapore; but many things are in place to start and perhaps accelerate that process of unraveling, which the government will, of course, continue to try to manage ideologically, but with much greater difficulty.

Note

1. Their profiles are available on the government website at URL: http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/CabinetAppointments/.

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