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Meritocracy for Public Service Excellence



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Foreword

The Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana (ACSH) and the UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) in Singapore enjoy an excellent close working collaboration.

The GCPSE was set up in 2012 by the Government of Singapore and the UNDP to be a catalyst for promoting effective reforms of public service in developing countries.

The ACSH was established in 2013 by 25 countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States, Central Asia, the Caucasus region and beyond, as well as several international organisations. It has financial and institutional support from the Government of Kazakhstan and backing of the UNDP as an implementing partner. It supports building institutional and human capacities in the region, and facilitates experience and solutions sharing on strengthening civil services and fostering cooperation in this area among participating countries.

This discussion paper is the product of the shared philosophy of the ACSH and the GCPSE. Both organisations seek to empower policymakers to build effective 21st century public service through the **AIM (Adaptive Impartial Meritocratic) for Excellence** approach in public service. This is founded on our common belief that the evidence is clear: Development happens where an impartial public service treats all equitably and fairly, building citizens' trust in government; where recruitment and promotion are based on ability; and where continuous learning is the basis for implementing incremental reform.

This paper therefore examines why development requires meritocracy in public service. We know that research shows that states with a civil service characterised by meritocratic recruitment and predictable, rewarding career ladders are associated with higher economic growth rates. Meritocracy in public services also has a significant impact on public servants' motivation, and a motivated and trusted public service will be essential for the successful achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

But what exactly is 'meritocracy'?



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Introduction

Meritocracy, or government by those with talent, seems self-evidently a good idea. The most able people will produce the best possible results and therefore the public welfare of the whole population will be optimized. Meritocracy therefore offers a fair system, which results in better outcomes for both the individual and society. Meritocracy provides talented and hard-working people from all walks of life with a means of advancement and the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the larger society. It can be a powerful vehicle for social mobility and incentivize people to do their best and reach their fullest potential.

Furthermore, a country governed by the best and the brightest must surely be better run than one that is not: and there is good evidence to support that conclusion: for example, research suggests that states run by meritocracies have higher rates of economic growth than those that do not. The highly influential 1997 World Development Report asserted that "Making a meritocracy of the civil service helps bring in high-quality staff, confers prestige on civil service positions, and can do a great deal to motivate good performance." (World Bank 1997, 92) In addition, "Where instead promotions are personalized or politicized, civil servants worry more about pleasing their superiors of influential politicians, and efforts to build prestige through tough recruitment standards are undercut." (World Bank 1997, 93).

Singapore offers a fine example. The country's founding father and first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, argued: "If you want Singapore to succeed...you must have a system that enables the best man and the most suitable to go into the job that needs them..."¹ In 1965, the city-state was a small trading port with an unemployment rate of 14 percent. Fifty

If you want Singapore to succeed... you must have a system that enables the best man and the most suitable to go into the job that needs them.

- Lee Kuan Yew

years later, its unemployment rate had dropped to 1.9%. In 1959 Singapore's GDP per capita was \$510. Fifty years later it is 100 times bigger. His success is exemplified by the fact that Singapore's per capita income is now far higher than that of its former colonial master, Great Britain. Whatever Lee Kuan Yew may have got wrong, on meritocracy he was apparently completely right.

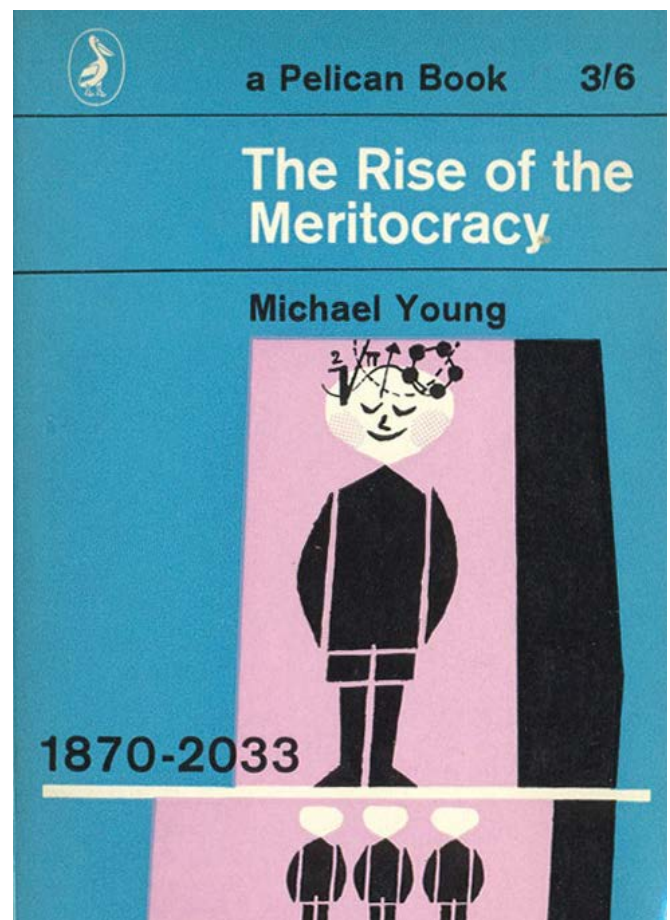
Yet, at a time of rising inequality around the globe, it is important to create and reflect a more level playing field, through public service excellence. Inequality is often entrenched and inherited.² High quality education, access

to healthcare, and good public transportation, for example, can all contribute towards providing citizens with equal opportunities for advancement. In an increasingly unequal world it will be important that meritocracy does not devolve into elitism, with little opportunity for those that are not already privileged to move ahead. It is also important to recognize that meritocracy does not obviate the need for transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Meritocracy after all, does not exist in isolation.

It is interesting to note that the term was first used in Singapore's parliament only in 1971, and the MP who raised the topic noted:

Let us... work for a society in Singapore where, on the one hand, people are rewarded and promoted on strict merit, and, on the other, ample opportunities are afforded to those who are hampered by poverty. In other words, let us build not merely a society based only on meritocracy, but let us have a meritocracy-plus society.³

So is this then what might be wrong with meritocracy? It is important to remember that the first use of the term was a negative one. A British sociologist called Michael Young wrote



© BY Things Magazine / The cover of a paperback version of Michael Young's 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

¹ J. Quah. 2010. *Public Administration Singapore-Style*. London, p.71.

² T. Piketty, 2013 *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p.237

³ Dr Augustine H. H. Tan, 30 July 1971.

a book in 1958 called *“The Rise of the Meritocracy”*. In this book, Michael Young warned that a new elite class was emerging that was out of touch with ordinary people. This elite would increasingly marry partners of similar social backgrounds, and then use its money to buy the best possible education for its children. This has proved highly prescient, as with the ‘Alumni’ system in some elite universities in the US whereby the children of graduates are almost automatically accepted due to the huge weighting this fact is given by the entrance process.⁴

So meritocracy can only be judged in connection with the way societies are structured and the values they represent, in theoretical treatments, and in literature and discussions specific to civil service reform, as well as in many other contexts. Its practice can vary from one context to another. It is a term that is widely used, but despite – and perhaps because of – this, it can be surprisingly challenging to pin down.

In recent years a debate has begun in many countries about what ‘merit’ is regarded as best. In the early stages of development, many like Lee Kuan Yew were in no doubt it simply meant the best educated, those with the best degrees from the best universities. But this simplicity is increasingly being questioned. Don’t officials also need to be in touch with the citizenry, and empathise with their lot? So scholars and politicians in countries such as Singapore and Japan with a long history of a narrowly defined concept of meritocracy, are increasingly questioning whether, for instance, a good law degree from the most elitist universities, really qualifies its proud recipient to deepen democracy through co-creation of policy with citizens, rather than simply telling them what to do.

This paper aims to stimulate thinking on how to deliver the Adaptive Impartial Meritocratic (AIM) for Excellence approach (see Page 3). To do that it is necessary to consider some of the ways meritocracy is theorised and practiced. The paper examines meritocracy in the civil service and considers how that relates to the idea of meritocracy itself.

Following this introduction, the paper looks at the question of how meritocracy is defined, and then reviews findings from the literature. Research generally shows the many benefits of meritocracy in the civil service (the concerned aspects are specified more precisely in the literature section and in the relevant papers) in the areas of increasing economic growth and reducing corruption, as well as other areas. It then looks more closely at some of the challenges of implementing meritocracy in the civil service before zooming out to look at critiques of meritocracy more broadly. Finally it briefly raises the topic of other factors that interact with meritocracy, and then concludes.

Meritocracy can be understood and practiced in different ways and it is important, in assessing it, to look closely at how it is specified in a given instance, both broadly as well as more specifically related to civil service reform. How meritocracy

4 E. Porter. 2015. “Education Gap Between Rich and Poor is Growing Wider”

is understood and practiced influences the outcomes it produces.⁵ It also puts forward that, as in the case of other areas of civil service reform, when it comes to how meritocracy is understood and practiced, context - including history and politics – matters greatly when it comes to reform efforts. The paper also underscores the point that meritocracy is but one of the factors which GCPSE and ACSH believe interact to shape governance outcomes.

Meritocracy is the subject of research in fields as diverse as education, business, and psychology. There is a large body of scholarship on meritocracy and its role in the civil service alone. This paper cannot and does not claim to represent or engage with all of the literature on meritocracy and the civil service, let alone the larger body of scholarship on meritocracy. The aim of the paper is to provide an introductory overview of some considerations related to the topic in regard to achieving the public service excellence needed for development.

Defining merit and meritocracy

Meritocracy can be defined with a greater or lesser degree of specificity, and therefore how clearly it can be understood varies. What meritocracy means can be very clearly specified, but it can also be necessary to pose some deeper questions about it. For example: How is merit defined? Who defines it? What is the process for defining it? Also, where is it applied (in what realm is its application being discussed)? What norms, values and principles, if any, are associated with it?⁶

Merit, Amartya Sen argues, is a contingent concept – dependent on what is considered to be a good society: “meritocracy, and more generally the practice of rewarding merit, is essentially underdefined, and we cannot be sure about its content – and thus about the claims regarding its “justice” – until some further specifications are made (concerning, in particular, the objectives to be pursued, in terms of which merit is to be, ultimately, judged). The merit of actions—and (derivatively) that of persons performing actions—cannot be judged independent of the way we understand the

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- Amartya Sen*

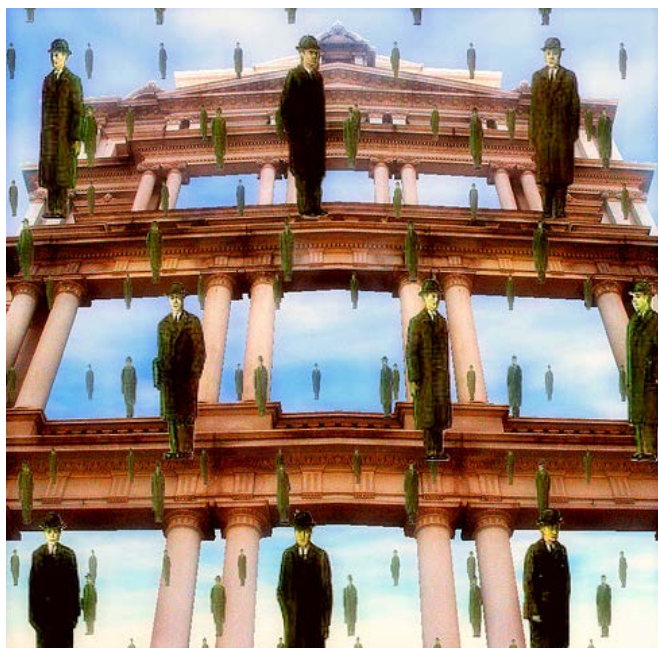
5 Writing with respect to meritocracy in the Singapore context, Donald Low in “Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy” highlights the importance of how meritocracy is practiced. He argues “...that there are varieties of meritocracy, some desirable, others possibly malignant. The debate should not be over whether we embrace meritocracy or not; rather, it should be over the kind of meritocracy we want.” (Low 2014, 49)

6 In their study of the practice of meritocracy in the United States and selected Asian countries, Poocharoen and Brillantes write “...one should never accept their system as being meritocratic without asking the essential questions: What does it mean exactly, what tools are being used, who is benefitting from the system, what are the trade-offs, and has the system solved the problem it is meant to solve?” (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013, 160-161)

nature of a good (or an acceptable) society.” (Sen 2000, 5-6) In other words, if meritocracy is a system for rewarding merit, then how merit is defined is obviously of crucial importance in assessing meritocracy.

While recognizing the importance of these questions and their encouragement of a critical engagement with the idea of meritocracy, at the same time it is certainly possible to put forward some of the ways that meritocracy is commonly understood. The idea of meritocracy as a social system in which “merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards” (Scully, 1997: 413) has received great attention since the term was popularized in 1958 by Young (1994). Advocates of meritocracy stress that in true meritocratic systems everyone has an equal chance to advance and obtain rewards based on their individual merits and efforts, regardless of their gender, race, class, or other non-merit factors.” (Castilla and Benard 2010, 543) Other definitions are even further specified, focusing, for example, solely on meritocracy in the civil service.

Meritocracy reinforces the notion of equality and competence as it rejects patronage, nepotism, corruption, and incompetence for entering the civil service. It is a system that values the principles of competition, open selection, careful evaluation of qualities, and of having a set of qualification standards and established recruitment process; rather than arbitrary appointment of individuals to civil service positions. Today, meritocracy in recruitment processes is often associated with having education qualifications, passing general exams, and satisfying position qualifications. In many cases this is accompanied by panel interviews and psychological tests. For promotion processes, meritocracy is associated with performance-based assessments of individuals with clear performance expectations and indicators to measure actions



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and results of work. However, there are great variations in the choice of instruments and the reasons to install merit systems among governments. (Poocharoen and Brillantes 2013, 143). In the context of the civil service, meritocracy is commonly discussed in connection with recruitment and promotion practices.

Literature on meritocracy

The research evidence is clear on the benefits of meritocracy in the civil service – including with respect to linkages with higher economic growth and reduced corruption - and sheds light on various aspects of the practice of meritocracy. However, as the GCPSE ‘theory of change’ suggests, with respect to civil service reform in general, there is much that remains unknown about ‘what works’ and how to do it. Previous civil service reform efforts have met with mixed success.⁷ The literature on the impact of bureaucratic structures on valued social outcomes “is dominated by case studies and a few case comparisons, and researchers have rarely resorted to large and comparative empirical investigations, mainly due to the lack of comparative observational data on bureaucratic structures, especially of a time-series character.” (Nitotskaya and Cingolani 2014, 3-4) In addition, even with greater evidence, the importance of contextualization would remain paramount – something discussed in further detail in this section.

► Meritocratic features and economic growth

An important study by Evans and Rauch (1999) considered whether state bureaucracies characterized by meritocratic recruitment and predictable, rewarding career ladders are associated with higher growth rates. Because the data, economic growth in 35 developing countries between 1970 and 1990, refer primarily to core economic agencies, the implication is not that the entire bureaucratic apparatus must be structured in this way to have positive effects on growth. Having Weberian structures in the strategic core of the bureaucracy may be sufficient. (Evans and Rauch 1999, 760).

Evans and Rauch underline the importance of meritocratic recruitment, which ideally is based on some combination of education and examination (Gerth and Mills 1958: 241; Parsons 1964: 333, 339), needs to be considered with a second characteristic: a predictable career ladder, which provides long-term tangible and intangible rewards for those recruited into the bureaucracy (Gerth and Mills 1958: 200-203; Parsons 1964: 334-35; Stinchcombe 1974).” (Evans and Rauch 1999, 751).

► Reduced corruption

The evidence shows that meritocratic recruitment reduces corruption, while other allegedly relevant bureaucratic

⁷ See e.g. “The most recent evaluation of the World Bank’s activities in public sector reform between 1999 and 2006 confirms the bleak picture. Alarming it states that despite the high share of bank projects with a substantial CSR aspect, civil service and administrative reform projects have the lowest success rate-below 45%-among the four subareas of public sector reform which the report evaluates (World Bank Evaluation Group 2008).” (Brösamle 2012, 2)

factors, such as public employees' competitive salaries, career stability, or internal promotion, do not have a significant impact. (Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell 2012). The study, covering 52 countries, suggests that a professional bureaucracy works to reduce corruption because it creates a separation of interests between bureaucrats and politicians. The authors conclude that corruption is prevented not because merit-recruited bureaucrats are "better types" than the political appointee, but simply that they are "different types." Both politicians and the professional bureaucracy need to be involved to deter corrupt behaviour. "Relatively high levels of corruption may thus also be expected from an administration that consists exclusively of merit-based bureaucrats without control by agents with a different (e.g., political) nature." (Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell 2012, 659).

The internal organization of a public body is a major determinant of corruption. Three features of the organization are systematically associated with less corruption: having decisions regularly audited by external or internal auditors; maintaining open and transparent procedures; and basing personnel decisions on criteria of merit and professional competence. Moreover, meritocracy at the top - the procedure for appointing the head of the agency - also matters. "Agencies whose head is popularly elected are systematically more corrupt and adopt worse internal organizations, while independent agencies whose head is appointed by a political body tend to have better organizational design." (Recanatini, Prati and Tabellini 2005).

▶ **Other benefits of meritocracy in the civil service**

Other evidence suggests merit-based recruitment and promotion through predictable, rewarding career ladders improve civil servants' capability and performance (Anderson et al. 2003) and are valued by citizens as an accountability mechanism (McCourt 2000).

A merit-based system can also help attract well-educated individuals. This is important as higher educational attainment among civil servants is linked to higher tax revenue mobilization, reduced corruption, better public financial management and higher economic growth (Arezki and Quintyn 2013; Arezki et al. 2012; Rao 2013, 16)

A report published by UNDP notes that, "the civil service at the national and local levels is a key system on which the state relies to fulfil its obligations towards its citizens. Thus, to function effectively and reach its development agenda, a country must prioritize investments in a professional, merit-based civil service and strengthen local governments responsible for overseeing or delivering basic social services, especially to the poor and other vulnerable groups ... the capacity of institutions to provide evidence-based analysis of the situation and sound policy options to address the crisis is critical. This fundamental capacity is grounded on the continuous availability of experienced

and well-trained staff in key government institutions and central economic agencies, such as ministries of planning, finance and central banks (Nelson 1990, ODI 2010)."⁸(UNDP 2011, 274)

▶ **Other considerations: on meritocratic recruitment mechanisms and on the 'paradox of meritocracy'**

But is the rigorous national exam, a method started in AD 605 in China, the best selection process? With meritocracy in practice, the utility of formal civil service examinations depends on whether and how context can influence the best method for conducting meritocratic recruitment. Recruitment to the civil service is, in order to prevent patronage, often centralized and based on performance in competitive examinations. This approach, albeit slow and occasionally cumbersome, is generally assumed to be the most meritocratic method of recruitment. However, 'gaming' leads aspirants to focus on passing the exam rather than being good officials. While some applicants may have skills suited for a specific position, they may not perform best in a general examination. As long as the system is not abused, a more flexible recruitment process based on, for example, interviews and CV screening, may be more meritocratic. It is therefore necessary to weigh the risk of abuse against the potential gains from more flexibility. Formal civil service examinations may therefore be the most meritocratic way to recruit civil servants only in countries where the risk for patronage is high. (Sundell 2014).

Research also suggests a 'paradox of meritocracy' - that when the culture of an organization explicitly promotes meritocracy, managers may show more gender bias (for men/against women). The paradox of meritocracy may seem counterintuitive but when individuals are led to feel unbiased, objective, or fair, they are more likely to express biased behavior. So meritocracy may be more difficult than it first appears and have hidden risks (Castilla and Benard 2010, 572) Identifying difficulty in implementing a more meritocratic system does not of course imply that women would fare better under a different system, given that they may be generally excluded from male-dominated patronage and power networks. (Rao 2013, 10, citing Goetz 2003).

⁸ Kohli 2004 finds a high degree of correlation between superior bureaucracy and high rates of economic growth (e.g., the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, India), and poor quality bureaucracy and low rates of economic growth (e.g., Nigeria, the Congo, Argentina and Syria): see also (UNDP 2011, 286)

► On the critical importance of context

The critical importance of taking bureaucratic history and politics into account is widely accepted.⁹ In *Jobs for the Boys*, which examines six cases of past and four cases of contemporary efforts to move away from patronage and towards civil service systems,¹⁰ Grindle writes that, "All reforms take place in historical contexts that shape and constrain possibilities for change, as the increasingly influential literature on historical institutionalism argues. This is certainly true for cases explored in this book. Patronage systems-their purpose, coherence, and structure-shaped what replaced them and significantly influenced the trajectory of how they were replaced. These systems, and the potential to alter them, were in turn products of how they reflected broader institutional and historical contexts and were shaped by them. In particular, the degree to which state leaders were able to dominate decision making, the effects of class and education systems, and the extent to which patronage systems had been captured by political parties emerged as important factors explaining differences and similarities among cases." (Grindle 2012, 244-245) Grindle also describes ways that change does happen, and notes that institutional reform is shaped by actors and strategic choices have a role in shaping outcomes, just as institutional legacies do." (Grindle 2012, 250).

The importance of understanding the ways that politics affect civil service reform efforts is also recognized because of "the primacy of politics in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of systems of appointment to public office." (Grindle 2012, Preface, x) After proposing ways that data on civil service reform could be improved and arguing for the imperative to try and do so, Brösamle says that even if we did have better data, civil

service reform success hinges on domestic politics at the national level.

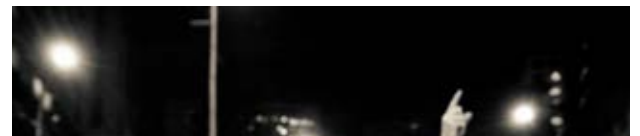
► The distance between theory and practice and other common problems in civil service reform

Many reforms or legal protections may exist on paper, but are often not implemented or made real in practice. Unsurprisingly, the same can be the case with reforms aimed at introducing greater meritocracy in the civil service. It is clear from a wide range of examples, from reforms specifically directed towards promoting meritocracy, to other kinds of governance reforms, that reform on paper does not necessarily mean reform in practice and that, in determining whether a system is meritocratic, looking beyond the formal system at the actual practice is important.

Grindle's examination of reform attempts in Latin America illustrates this point particularly well. With respect to attempts to reform patronage systems in Latin America, Grindle write that, "In summary, by the 2000s, Latin American countries were not deficient in laws mandating selection of public administrators on the basis of merit or setting up equivalents of a civil service commission to undertake recruitment and ensure fair treatment and the political neutrality of public sector workers.

Yet despite the consistency of this history throughout the region, in the early years of the new century, only Costa Rica, Chile, and Brazil recruited significant numbers of public sector workers through a structured career civil service system. Indeed, the implementation of civil service legislation was extremely weak in Latin America. As concluded in the IDB study: 'It is precisely the divergence between the norms and the practices that is the greatest weakness of civil service systems in their countries.'"(Grindle 2012,151)¹¹.

⁹ E.g. Brösamle argues for greater consideration of what he calls 'bureaucratic heritage' in the context of civil service reform efforts. He remarks, "Collecting data on and understanding bureaucratic heritage-that is a country's institutional origins, history and reform path all of which co-determine current administrative institutions-is key for understanding bureaucratic quality and carrying out useful pre-CSR analyses." (Brösamle 2012, 10). Identical reforms applied in different systems, or at different development stages of similar systems, can have very different and often undesired effects: see Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 39). Andrews writes: "[E]ven something [as presumably universal as] bureaucracy does not convey with the same effect from place to place, primarily because



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