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NS deferment: It's all about equity

Eugene K.B. Tan

For The Straits Times

National service is the cornerstone of Singapore's defence and security. In serving NS at 18 as military conscripts, Singaporean young men put on hold personal pursuits and aspirations.

Sometimes, they request deferment. This issue of long-term NS deferment was the focus of several parliamentary questions at Monday's Parliament sitting.

In June, the Ministry of Defence rejected 17-year-old footballer Benjamin James Davis' application for long-term deferment from full-time NS. Deferment would enable him to first embark on his professional career before NS with newly promoted English Premier League team Fulham.

In Parliament, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen explained at length why Mindef rejected the application. First, it assessed that Benjamin is playing for Fulham as British national, not a Singapore citizen. Second, his father, Mr Harvey Davis, declined to indicate when his son would return to serve NS if it were deferred. Third, Mr

Davis indicated that his son would return to serve NS only if he was unsuccessful in his professional career.

The crux of Mindef's assessment is that Benjamin has no intention of returning to fulfil his NS duties, especially if he is offered another contract after his two-year senior contract. It decided that this did not demonstrate commitment to serve Singapore's interests and did not merit a deferment.

CRUCIAL PUBLIC SUPPORT VITAL

The issue drew much attention from the public, with heated debate from some who argued that Mindef should be more flexible.

What is often inadequately appreciated is that NS has significant public acceptance and legitimacy because it is applied even-handedly and impartially.

Where deferment applications are concerned, the principle of equity – equality of treatment regardless of background or status – must be stringently upheld.

Benjamin's case is not unique. Many young Singaporeans have precocious ability in a variety of domains. An oft-cited reason in deferment requests is that NS impedes a person's talent development and ability.

However, Mindef has granted deferment to individuals if their deferment serves Singapore's national interest first and foremost.

In the past, Mindef has granted long-term deferments to individuals in sports, the arts and other areas who represent Singapore in international apex competitions and are potential medal winners. (In the past 15 years, only three sportsmen secured long-term deferment.)

The requirement of contributing to the national interest is necessary if the NS deferment framework is not to undermine the ethos and sacrifice of Singaporeans who put aside their personal interests to serve when called upon.

Last year, in cases concerning NS defaulters, a specially empanelled three-judge appellate High Court acknowledged the fundamental principles that undergird NS: national security, a critical need; universality, where those fit to serve are conscripted; and equity.

Equity requires that those serving full-time NS should do so "at around the same age". When required to enlist, a person must do so "without regard to his personal convenience and considerations". Otherwise, there will be "strong feelings of unfairness and

resentment in those who have made personal sacrifices to serve NS, and, over time, lower their morale and eventually also erode public support for NS".

Further, any "perception that NS can be done on one's own terms would undermine the strength of our defence force and thus our national security", the panel decided.

These principles and norms apply with equal force and validity to deferment as well.

ACCOMMODATING SPORTSMEN

But can there be more flexibility in accommodating sportsmen's training and competition needs, such as being less tight-fisted on granting deferments and permitting NS to be served in phases?

Over the years, Mindef has adopted various measures to accommodate sportsmen, including adjusting enlistment dates, granting short-term deferments, and providing time off for training and participation in major competitions, subject to the exigencies of service. Similarly, the SAF Sportsman Scheme grants full-time national servicemen additional time off and leave for training and competitions.

Dr Ng cited the examples of Saifullah Akbar, Ikhsan Fandi and Irfan Fandi as promising young footballers who served NS and are now on the threshold of advancing their professional careers with European clubs.

These examples show that NS need not impede sporting development and ability. These footballers demonstrated their commitment, discipline and grit in serving NS while also conscientiously chasing their football dreams.

To be sure, sacrifices are made and opportunities lost during full-time NS.

Even where notions of fairness and equity evolve over time, the requirements of exceptional talent and national glory must never be flouted. Otherwise, equity will not only be illusory but also a sham. NS will become unstuck.

The saga is a timely reminder that citizenship is not just a bundle of rights and privileges but carries with it responsibilities.

Benjamin's father had declared that he would encourage his son to renounce his Singapore citizenship in order to pursue his footballing career if deferment was not granted. (Benjamin's obligation to serve NS remains even if he were to renounce his Singapore citizenship.)

Such a remark must grate on patriotic Singaporeans' ears. For Singapore must never be the back-up option for any citizen, especially one who has benefited from the system. Neither should the principles guiding NS be held to ransom by any citizen, not least from a citizen who plays for a team as a foreign national.

Questions will persist as to whether NS extracts too high a price from individuals serving NS. This tension is inevitable as society evolves. Each era will find its own balance.

When NS was introduced in 1967, Singaporeans recognised that every young male Singapore citizen had to be conscripted, irrespective of ethnic background, descent or socio-economic class.

Universality and equity in NS must be jealously guarded and nourished. Anything less would result in NS losing public support, and that would be to our collective peril.

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