

Research Article

Navigating Meritocracy and Political Influence in Regional Bureaucratic Recruitment: Insights from Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examined the interplay between meritocracy and political influence in recruiting local bureaucrats in Indonesia, a process with significant consequences for governance and public service delivery. Meritocracy, emphasizing competence and qualifications, is widely recognized as the normative civil service (PNS) recruitment principle. However, in practice, political intervention frequently undermines merit-based procedures, fostering nepotism and weakening the quality of public services. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzed primary and secondary data to evaluate how meritocratic principles have been integrated into regional recruitment practices. The findings revealed that while policies supporting meritocracy are formally in place, their implementation was consistently constrained by pervasive political interference. This eroded fairness and transparency, contributing to inefficiencies within local bureaucracies. The study recommends strengthening governance mechanisms, improving transparency, and encouraging community participation in recruitment to address these challenges. This research contributes to the broader discourse on bureaucratic reform by highlighting the persistent gap between policy and practice. It offers insights for policymakers seeking to enhance recruitment systems and governance quality in Indonesia.

Keywords

Meritocracy, Political Influence, Bureaucratic Recruitment, Governance, Public Service, Civil Servants (PNS), Indonesia, Nepotism, Administrative Efficiency, Transparency

1. Introduction

Bureaucracy is the cornerstone of governance, making its recruitment processes a vital topic for academic analysis and policy discussion. Meritocracy and political influence are pivotal in shaping the framework for recruiting state bureaucrats. Many developed and developing countries employ merit-based recruitment systems to ensure the competence and professionalism of civil servants. As a developing nation, Indonesia presents a compelling case study due to its unique approach to bureaucratic recruitment. Local governments in

Indonesia often use this process to provide political favors, highlighting a significant tension between meritocratic principles and political interests. This dynamic has led to a bureaucracy marked by insufficient competence and inefficiency, underscoring the need to shift toward a merit-based recruitment approach [1-3].

In assessing the state of meritocracy within Indonesia's public institutions, the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) has categorized agencies into four performance lev-

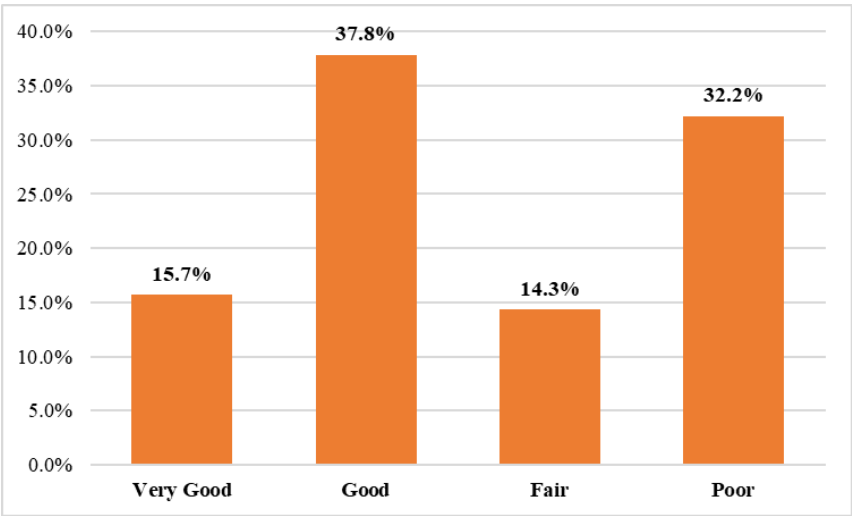
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els: Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor. In 2023, only 15.7% of institutions achieved a Very Good rating, while 37.8% were classified as Good. The remaining were distributed between Fair (14.3%) and Poor (32.2%), indicating that a significant proportion of institutions are still struggling to uphold merit-based principles in bureaucratic recruitment (Figure 1).



Source: State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) (2023).

Figure 1. Distribution of Merit System Scores for Indonesian Government Institutions (2023).

While these overall ratings provide a general picture, a closer look at performance from an assessment perspective reveals uneven progress. In 2023, Procurement (78.9%) and Needs Planning (78.4%) achieved the highest scores, reflecting relative success in the initial stages of the recruitment process. Conversely, Career Development (33.5%) and Promotion and Transfer (51.0%) received the lowest scores, exposing systemic weaknesses in post-recruitment human resource management. Other areas, such as Payroll, Rewards, and Discipline (67.0%), Protection and Services (62.6%), Performance Management (60.6%), and Information Systems (57.2%), also highlight the need for structural improvement. These disparities suggest that while procedural compliance with meritocracy has advanced in certain areas, its consistent application across all HR functions remains incomplete (Table 1).

Table 1. Achievement Scores by Merit System Assessment Aspect in Indonesian Government Agencies, 2023.

Assessment Aspect	Score (%)
Procurement	78.9
Needs Planning	78.4
Payroll, Rewards, and Discipline	67.0
Protection and Services	62.6
Performance Management	60.6
Information Systems	57.2

Assessment Aspect	Score (%)
Promotion and Transfer	51.0
Career Development	33.5

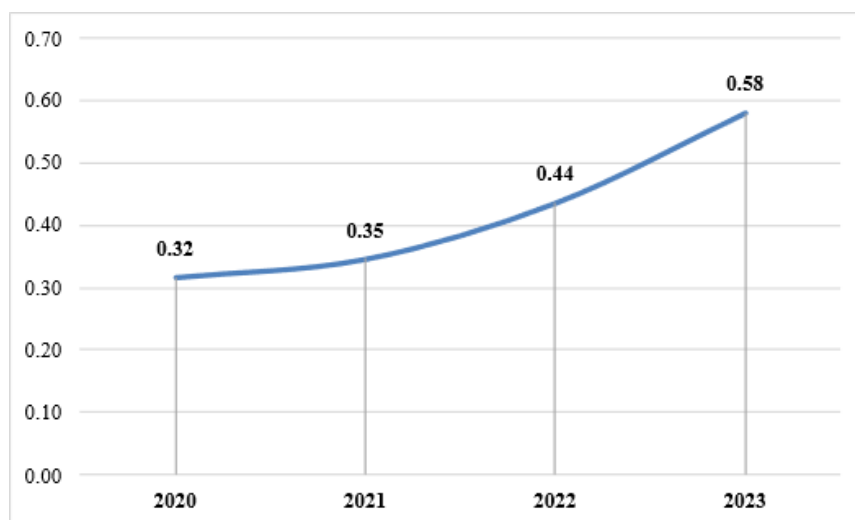
Source: State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) (2023).

An adequate system of governance relies heavily on the quality and performance of its public service professionals. The success of government bureaucracies is closely tied to the competence and dedication of civil servants, whose skills, experience, and commitment directly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. Recognizing this, best practices in bureaucratic recruitment emphasize performance-based systems over politically motivated selections. This study aims to assess how performance-based strategies have been implemented as policies in practice. It employs a descriptive research method with a qualitative approach, incorporating primary and secondary data to triangulate findings and ensure a comprehensive analysis [4-6].

Recent data from the World Bank’s Government Effectiveness Index-which measures perception of the quality of public services, the professionalism and independence of the civil service from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies-shows a steady improvement in Indonesia’s bureaucratic capacity. On a scale ranging from approximately -2.5 to +2.5, Indonesia’s score increased from 0.32 in 2020 to 0.58 in 2023. This upward

trend reflects gradual gains in governance quality and policy execution, although the score remains below that of several

regional peers. The year-to-year progression is illustrated in Figure 2.



Source: World Bank (2025).

Figure 2. Trend of Indonesia's Government Effectiveness Index, 2020-2023.

Implementing merit-based recruitment is essential, as it significantly influences policies and legal frameworks. However, in the context of Indonesian local governance, it is equally crucial to consider local wisdom in balancing meritocratic principles and political factors in public office distribution. Despite mechanisms designed to uphold meritocracy, their application remains inconsistent across Indonesia. The central government must actively promote, guide, and enforce these mechanisms in provincial administrations while adhering to meritocracy, equal opportunity, and social justice principles.

This study also aims to provide insights into the factors influencing appointments to critical posts and proposes performance-based assessment rules for such appointments within an evidence-based policy framework. Policymakers must evaluate the effectiveness of bureaucratic recruitment practices, focusing on appointees' accountability, professionalism, qualifications, and work experience. Recruitment processes must prioritize candidates' educational backgrounds and relevant training to build a more competent and ethical civil service.

In line with these objectives, this study seeks to address key questions, including the extent to which meritocratic principles guide recruitment processes, how political preferences impact the hiring of skilled civil servants, and the role of stakeholders in maintaining fairness and transparency in recruitment. This research draws on the work of [7-9] to frame its analysis.

The tension between meritocracy and political influence in local bureaucratic recruitment is a complex and ongoing challenge with significant implications for Indonesian gov-

ernance and public administration. The recruitment of civil servants plays a crucial role in shaping the professionalism and performance of public services. A central question in this context is whether recruitment practices adhere to meritocratic principles, prioritizing ability and qualifications over political affiliations. Political considerations often overshadow merit-based processes, raising concerns about fairness, transparency, and the quality of public service delivery.

Understanding key stakeholders' roles- of key stakeholders, government agencies, political entities, and the community- in reviewing and implementing recruitment procedures is vital to ensuring that civil servants are selected with integrity and contribute effectively to the provincial administration. This discussion centers on aligning recruitment processes with meritocratic ideals, assessing the impact of political interference, and examining the responsibilities of stakeholders in promoting a fair and transparent system [10-13].

This study addresses several critical issues, including: (1) To what extent are recruitment methods for civil servants based on meritocratic principles? (2) How do political preferences influence the hiring process for skilled government employees? (3) What role do stakeholders play in ensuring fairness and transparency in recruiting temporary civil servants?

The research investigates how political influence shapes public servant recruitment in Indonesia, where meritocracy is often idealized as the optimal method for local bureaucratic hiring. By emphasizing qualifications and skills over political connections, meritocratic practices aim to enhance recruitment outcomes. This study also explores how local bureaucracies in Indonesia navigate the challenges of balancing

meritocratic ideals with political pressures, highlighting the critical role of stakeholders in preserving transparency and fairness in the process [14-18].

Background and Reasons

In any country, the bureaucracy plays a vital role in implementing governance. It is also evident that the bureaucracy is a crucial part of governance at all levels, from central to local governments. Although central and local bureaucracies have different qualities when administering public services through delegation, their methods complement one another. At first glance, there appears to be a desire to deliver the most excellent service, yet it is highly successful at resolving community issues. One approach to accomplish this aim is for the government to attempt to attract competent officials. When addressing bureaucratic recruiting, merit emerges as the optimum phrase. As the frontline institution handling public affairs, the regional bureaucracy must be staffed by individuals with character, integrity, and expertise in various fields of employment [19, 20].

In many underdeveloped nations, this tradition is based on loyalty. Both assumptions suggest that a political approach outperforms meritocracy in recruiting the proper individuals. However, selecting people based on loyalty can lead to several issues, including nepotism. According to previous patterns, appointed persons are typically local public workers who are also relatives of regional chiefs. As a result, there is a trade-off between using merit to attract government personnel and using patronage. To solve the issue of determining merit versus prominent politicians, public officials in many nations are currently appointed to prime positions based on credentials of knowledge, skills, and talents obtained through a primary system mechanism based on merit in procurement [21-23].

Government tenure is widespread among lower-level officials and administrators. The question of political influence in civil service recruiting has received substantial attention. Several research findings have been summarized, showing that political candidates' competencies are superior to merit-based candidates. This is due to politicians appointing government workers based on political orientation, with the authority to select persons they thought best suited for open jobs. These findings also show that politicians are not always good but have flaws. If they hold leadership roles, they can control power-hungry subordinates less. Because politicians are subject to job demands from their constituency, reproduction balances allegiance and skill. The choice between meritocracy and patronage in pursuing civil servants through the government tenure system is a contestable and inescapable strategy. Indonesia is one of the case studies with multi-level politics, making this study significant as a model of local bureaucracy [24-26].

2. Theoretical Framework

The material here provides insights into the bureaucratic recruitment process. The recruiting process can provide im-

portant indicators for assessing preferential compliance with policies implemented under the bureaucratic reform paradigm. This chapter will go into greater detail about this process. This section will detail the theoretical framework used to analyze bureaucratic recruitment. The theoretical formulation reflects the current condition of modern bureaucracy based on readings that distinguish the practical application of professionalism, including usage types such as nationalism, patrimonialism, and development [27-29].

Discussion of the dynamics of bureaucratic recruiting is critical, particularly in countries that have experienced substantial changes, to help answer three crucial concerns. First, where does the state bureaucracy stand when adjusting to the reformist paradigm shift? These systems do not exist in isolation; instead, they evolve in response to performance and the intrusion of political power and partiality. Recruitment is described as the process of joining formal bureaucratic entities. It features a highly articulated selection mechanism, similar to a game in which numerous aspects shape the ultimate conclusion. The classic model of public personnel management specifies several processes involved in civil servant recruitment: the merits of the "generalist" approach vs the "specialist" test, cognitive versus non-cognitive criteria, and so on. Public employment tests are seen as capable of correctly forecasting future effectiveness. However, these techniques are also critiqued for failing to include "the greatest hope of finding the most capable people" in the recruiting process to conform with changing institutional dynamics and the nature of public work. In reality, bureaucracy's "adult game" is centered on recruitment dynamics through networks, personal relationships, and political identities determined by ethnicity, religion, and demography. This, in turn, molds patronage, which is referred to in this paragraph as "Meritocracy and Its Rival." [30-32].

Conceptualizing Meritocracy and Political Influence

In conceptualizing the older notions of merit and corruption, we believe that meritocracy consists of a long regime for socializing people, a long-term orientation emphasizing education or professional skills with formal values and qualifications, and the enhancement of experience and qualifications. Political influence demonstrates how these principles impact local technocracy in turn. An investigation of these factors is required to investigate how local bureaucrats in district and sub-district offices understand these political principles and authorities. Given the limited data on these specific factors, this study offers a nuanced interpretation of meritocracy vs political networks in the official recruiting process. In actuality, the essential parts of meritocracy can occasionally be purchased, forged, or fabricated [33-36].

This study serves as a reminder of the ideal concept of meritocracy in bureaucracy, which is required not only for hiring and performance evaluation but also for public trust in government. However, the objectives of this bureaucracy are frequently far from being achieved due to changes brought about by ground realities, whether through traditional gov-

ernance or unexpected interventions by local leaders. As a result, criticizing recruiters who reveal their pedigree to their colleagues may be overly harsh. Patronage exists in many sectors, including the governmental sector. The former administration may have forced particular residents into its public sector groups. However, nepotism implies that just a few sons and daughters may be appointed, which lacks compelling logical backing [37-39].

3. Recruitment Practices in Local Bureaucracies

Local bureaucracy is the level in the bureaucratic pyramid that has the most direct interaction with the people. However, hiring the 'proper' individuals as government servants is more than just a technical challenge. Currently, the world of public administration understands that how civil servants are recruited significantly impacts the outcomes of local development policies. Although it has been proposed that there are two distinct recruitment strategies, subsequent experiences contradict such a distinction. Although many recruitment methods prioritize political factors, they may seek specific technical talents [18, 40, 41].

It is vital to investigate the dominating practices of the bureaucracy. This omission offers factual support for two hypotheses. The first is that an administrative meritocracy approach can be more beneficial in ensuring effective civil servants for social welfare; the second is that regional administration is formed using a bottom-up political system to create the upper echelons of civil servants. However, it is shocking that anti-political recruiting is becoming a 'cultural trend' in emerging nations as part of an endeavor to construct a competent and effective administration. The failure to perform an objective and merit-based recruitment examination with the District Government might result in corruption and inefficiency in the local administration. To solve this issue, several nations are adopting merit-based recruiting processes that stress qualifications and abilities above political connections [42-44].

In Indonesia, recruiting processes in local bureaucracies frequently prioritize political influence above meritocracy, resulting in corruption and inefficiency. When considering the preparedness and capabilities of human resources, infrastructure, money, and other resources, employees make sense. However, unfair recruiting might have profound implications under certain circumstances, bringing unskilled and unprofessional people to the district administration. When considering recruitment fairness, it is vital to investigate recruiting practices' political influence and objectivity as signs of bureaucratic bias [18, 40-45].

3.1. Performance-based Recruiting

Recruitment is when an organization picks one or more candidates from a pool of applicants to fill a vacant job.

Merit-based recruiting is a set of methods to find and attract the most qualified individuals. Most nations use various methods and approaches to determine merit in recruiting. The simplest type is merit-based. All countries embrace the merit principle and provide variants described in practice. More complex systems include specific skills and competencies, criteria such as academic and professional qualifications in recruitment activities, and selection processes that include practical tests and experience requirements to determine candidates' comparative potential, ability to perform tasks, and job success [46-48].

Performance-based recruiting is critical because it guarantees that the firm has qualified personnel who can carry out their duties properly. The emphasis in merit-based recruiting is on the candidate's ability to perform the position rather than their qualifications, which guide the selection process. Thus, selection methods include a method that acknowledges the advantages of "choosing winners" during merit-based hiring. Merit-based recruiting requires that openings be openly publicized and that candidates compete fairly and transparently. This procedure guarantees that city managers are selected primarily based on their competence rather than personal connections. The advantages of merit-based recruitment are clear, mainly when merit-based techniques are used proactively in recruiting people, resulting in much better public support for public expenditure and efficiency. Given the public's conviction in the importance of moral and competent public officials, the proposed method is likely to become more significant at this point. Establishing recruitment processes inside the bureaucracy [49-52].

3.2. Political Influence in Recruitment

However, selection is not always based on merit in more than a few local (or regional) administrations. It is based on someone's political ties. This is reflected in the high level of two-tier appointments, in which government officials are directly appointed by parliament members based on resumes without taking exams and then promoted not for their merit but for office findings, political connections, and potential vote-gathering ability in election years or the long term. There are no empirical studies on the political effect of this prevalent practice in the local bureaucracy. However, what is known about one local bureaucracy shows that a similar strategy is being used in recruiting. In this context, appointments are used as a political tool to attain objectives, attempting to manipulate the possible collection of constituent votes [53-55].

For example, the interview might be used to demonstrate that the hiring choice is based on the candidate's achievements and credentials rather than their political ties. Observational instruments, like tests, are seldom tested, and their dependability is recorded, leaving much to the observer's abilities and knowledge. Another type of political influence might emerge during the early phases of the selection process. For example, the interview panel may refuse to grant points

for the interview, preferring to produce a report and forcing applicants to demonstrate qualifications they do not have on paper. We do not know if these things may be seen in other local councils or councils that utilize testing and shortlisting. In most cases, we can only speculate on how political influence might operate in a two- or three-tier appointment system; however, where recruitment officers are not established staff but are drawn from the council as a whole, we can assume that political back-scratching and horse-trading may play a role [56-58].

Politics, as much as exam results, may impact part-time or nominated assistant interviews because they are considerably more intimate and informal than full-time or permanent employment. This is not simply a matter of 'holding constant' *ceteris paribus*, as we find it difficult to keep other things constant; instead, after recording the test results so that they can be made comparable across the various tests we conducted with the local councils, the factors that may determine the appointment include not only test performance but also position category, candidate ranking, and where they are applying. Indeed, as we will see later, political ties are frequently more significant than competence. Only long-term insiders in the agency - those with the appropriate connections - can often judge merit because so much of the service and value depends on knowing the right people in government. Thousands of industrious government officials who work long hours without compensation deserve recognition, and some gain from their expertise.

4. Recruitment Policies and Practices in Indonesia

For example, Indonesian Law 5/2014 on the State Civil Apparatus regulates the norms of open recruitment. Furthermore, several flagship regulations have been issued that directly or indirectly address the organization and management of regional bureaucracy, covering topics such as organizational methods, personnel management and recruitment processes, the formation of civil servant work units, and the relationships between villages, regencies, and cities. The most comprehensive law is Law 23/2014 on Regional Government, which requires regional governments to monitor and facilitate personnel recruitment in district and city administrations, as well as promote the use of merit principles in organizational management, and Law 6/2014 on Villages, which requires significant decentralization of personnel and management at the district level [59-63].

The performance-based strategy promises at least two logical eradication phases. First, they attempt to shield the local bureaucracy from direct and indirect political influence by ensuring that officials are devoted to their policies rather than patrons. Second, implementing merit-based organizational criteria and hiring the finest bureaucratic candidates would result in an efficient and successful administration that

provides essential public services to residents. Negative scholarship, but the speech proved itself: while the national government advocates such regulations and processes, there is compelling evidence that recruitment in Indonesia's local bureaucracy is not meritocratic. For example, the role of province and district chiefs in approving selected officials and civil servants is emphasized. Another research focuses on how public officials use their relationships and networks to gain access to local employment possibilities. This reveals gaps and difficulties in actual recruiting processes within the local administration. Such insights are rarely discovered in typical governance reports, which are unduly focused on the sequence of good governance. Finally, the proposed reforms mentioned in the research will contribute to restoring meritocratic ideals [7, 51, 62, 63].

5. Challenges and Implications

First and foremost, establishing a meritocratic local bureaucracy is always a difficult task. This study's findings also show that meritocracy is restricted or minimalist in municipal bureaucracy, which is particularly susceptible to political influence due to the bottom-up recruiting method. Politics often influences the bureaucratic recruiting process. This means that meritocracy is nearly impossible to apply in that context. According to this study, it is impossible to assert that effective administration and excellent public services in local government can be accomplished without theoretically articulated meritocracy. Maintaining meritocracy inside the bureaucratic system can weaken faith in public administration and its ability to provide services. Politicizing the bureaucracy can result in ineffective public administration, increasing corruption, and wasting resources for those with the fewest claims. Many studies have found that public services suffer in terms of quality in nations where the bureaucratic system is severely tainted by political intervention. Free societies regard governmental administration and bureaucratic authorities as inept, hampered by corruption, rent-seeking, and the provision of subpar public services. Can we ensure that the municipal bureaucrats' recruitment is transparent, clean, responsible, and participatory? Who can manage the bureaucratic recruiting process [7, 61, 64].

Recruitment and appointment procedures substantially impact governance and public service performance. Local officials must execute their tasks and make decisions mostly independently and without oversight. As a result, staff significantly impact the success of their businesses. Beyond reputation or symbolism, residents and researchers should be concerned with meritocratic recruitment at the 'frontline of the state.'

When individuals hold bureaucratic power with hiring authority, every bureaucratic duty or function can theoretically be integrated into political goals. In its most severe form, such actions can cause the bureaucracy to collapse, leaving it effectively managed by a few political loyalists or the highest

echelons of the hierarchy. However, such actions do not need to weaken the bureaucracy's impartiality and service orientation. Where bureaucracy is still structured and functioning on a chain of command rooted in Weberian concepts about universal professional workers, politically appointed infusions undoubtedly swarm career officials; the political-bureaucratic combination can also purposefully limit career officials' discretionary power, professionalism, and rent-seeking abilities. As a result, the quantity and quality of professional performance among working-level public officials are jeopardized.

Recruitment based on performance levels entails hiring the proper individuals with the required abilities and integrity, as described in the job description. However, the employer's responsibility is to create a job everyone wants. Given these practical ramifications, we contend that the actuality of recruiting is significant. Several case studies have shown the actual application of these theoretical concepts. Party bureaucrat case studies show a negative correlation between the presence of party activists and the performance of public services. Additional research indicates that political recruiting is associated with poorer public satisfaction and trust. Only by recruiting independently recruited specialists will the government be able to limit, if not eliminate, the overall negative implications of this recruitment.

Abbreviations

PNS	Civil Servant / State Civil Apparatus
KASN	State Civil Apparatus Commission
HR	Human Resources

Author Contributions

Saiful Deni: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing

Aji Deni: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing

Thamrin Husein: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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