Bureaucratic Reform and the Enhancement of Civil Service Performance
(A Literature Review on the Merit System Policy in Indonesia)

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Abstract. This article examines the dynamics, challenges, and opportunities in implementing the merit system policy within the context of Indonesia's bureaucratic reform, employing a narrative literature review approach using a triangulation of scholarly sources. Thematic analysis identifies five critical themes that hinder the implementation of the merit system: structural tensions between political patronage and meritocracy that create a hybrid spoils–merit system; significant institutional capacity gaps between central and local governments; digital transformation through platforms such as CAT, SmartASN, and SIPINTER as catalysts for transparency and objectivity; organizational cultural resistance rooted in patrimonial and seniority values; and the weakening of independent oversight exacerbated by the dissolution of KASN's mandate. Although a progressive regulatory framework has been established through Law No. 5 of 2014, the implementation of the merit system remains constrained by persistent clientelism, limited institutional capacity, and cultural resistance. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on Weberian bureaucracy, New Public Management, and good governance by confirming that the implementation of the merit system in developing countries constitutes a political–cultural transformation that requires fundamental changes in political incentive structures, institutional capacity, and organisational values. Managerial implications include strengthening independent oversight, making substantial investments in institutional capacity, accelerating inclusive digital transformation, and implementing systematic change management programs to expedite the transition toward a performance-based bureaucracy that is professional and integrity-driven in support of Indonesia's Golden Vision 2045.

Keywords: merit system; bureaucratic reform; civil service; political patronage; institutional capacity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic reform has become a crucial agenda in the transformation of governance systems across many nations, particularly in developing countries that face complex challenges in improving the quality of public services and strengthening public trust in government institutions (Wahyurudhanto, 2020). In the context of Indonesia, bureaucratic reform emerged as a national priority following the 1998 crisis, driven by public demands for a government that is more professional, transparent, and accountable (Ali et al., 2017). The erosion of public trust in government institutions, marked by persistent practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), created momentum for fundamental change in the management of the civil service (Aparatur Sipil Negara/ASN).

One of the main pillars of bureaucratic reform is the implementation of the merit system, a human resource management approach that places competence, qualifications, and performance as the primary basis for civil service recruitment, promotion, and career development (UNDP, 2015). The merit system is designed to eliminate patronage and nepotism while ensuring that personnel decisions are grounded in objectivity and fairness (Oliveira & Perry, 2024). Theoretically, the merit system offers a solution for building an efficient,

responsive, and high-integrity bureaucracy, as demonstrated by its success in many developed countries in improving public service quality and governmental performance.

In Indonesia, the commitment to the merit system was formally institutionalised through Law No. 5 of 2014 on the State Civil Apparatus, which establishes the merit system as the foundation of civil service management aimed at creating a professional, neutral, and politically independent bureaucracy (Ali et al., 2017; Malik & Prasojo, 2023). However, the implementation of the merit system in Indonesia continues to face significant structural and cultural barriers. Berenschot (2018) identified that the legacy of the New Order's patronage system, where bureaucrats had strong discretionary control over state resource allocation, created incentives for politicians to prioritise loyalty over competence in appointments. This condition has been exacerbated by the direct election system, which intensifies competition for control over public resources, leading to bureaucratic appointments that are often influenced by political considerations and personal connections rather than merit.

Furthermore, McCourt (2015) emphasised that the success of merit system implementation depends not only on a strong regulatory framework but also on institutional readiness, political commitment, and long-term bureaucratic cultural transformation. In Indonesia, although progress has been made in regulatory and oversight aspects, such as the establishment of the Civil Service Commission (KASN) policy, harmonisation challenges, limited local government capacity, and resistance to change remain major obstacles (Malik & Prasojo, 2023).

This article aims to comprehensively examine the existing literature on the implementation of the merit system policy within Indonesia's bureaucratic reform framework. Through a narrative literature review approach, this study identifies the dynamics, structural and cultural barriers, and potential opportunities to strengthen the merit system as a tool for improving civil service performance. Accordingly, this article seeks to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the complexity of merit system implementation in developing countries, particularly Indonesia and to formulate constructive policy recommendations to accelerate the transformation toward a performance-based bureaucracy characterised by professionalism and integrity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Weberian Bureaucratic Theory and the Merit System

The bureaucratic theory developed by Max Weber in the late 19th century serves as a significant theoretical foundation for understanding modern state administration and its relevance to the implementation of the merit system. Weber conceptualised the *ideal type* of bureaucracy as an organisational system characterised by a clear hierarchy, formal division of labour based on specialisation, rational rules and procedures, and recruitment and promotion based on technical competence and objective qualifications rather than personal proximity or political affiliation (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). The principle of meritocracy within Weberian bureaucracy emphasises that the appointment and career advancement of civil servants must be free from the spoils system or political patronage, which, during the pre-reform administrative period, often led to inefficiency and structural corruption.

In the context of Indonesia's bureaucratic reform, Weberian principles serve as a normative reference for the implementation of the merit system as stipulated in Law No. 5 of 2014 on the State Civil Apparatus. However, empirical studies show that the application of Weber's rational legal model in Indonesia still faces the dilemma of a "dual culture", the tension between the rationality of formal systems and the patrimonial bureaucratic practices that prioritise personal loyalty and political proximity over professional competence (Berenschot, 2018; Oliveira & Perry, 2024).

Berenschot (2018) found that the legacy of the authoritarian New Order created a bureaucracy with strong discretionary control over state resources, which in turn incentivised politicians to favour loyalty over merit in appointments. This condition hampers the transformation toward a professional, politically neutral Weberian bureaucracy. Therefore, implementing the merit system is not merely an administrative or procedural reform but rather a fundamental cultural transformation toward professionalism, impartiality, and political neutrality.

New Public Management (NPM) and Performance Orientation

New Public Management (NPM) emerged in the late 20th century, particularly in OECD countries, as a reform paradigm in response to the perceived rigidity, inefficiency, and procedural focus of traditional bureaucracies. Christopher Hood (1991), who first conceptualised the term NPM, identified seven key principles: hands-on professional management, explicit standards and performance measures, output-based control, disaggregation of public sector units, competition in service delivery, adoption of private-sector

management practices, and disciplined use of resources (Hood, 1991; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). NPM emphasises that public bureaucracy should focus on efficiency, *results-based accountability*, and customer satisfaction by adopting market mechanisms and private-sector management tools such as performance contracts, key performance indicators (KPIs), and performance-based reward and punishment systems.

In the context of Indonesia's civil service management, the merit system aligns closely with NPM principles, as both emphasise competence- and performance-based recruitment and promotion, output-based evaluation, and incentive structures that encourage healthy competition in public service delivery. The application of NPM is intended to promote *results-oriented* behaviour among civil servants rather than mere adherence to bureaucratic procedures (Robinson, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

However, as noted by Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020), the success of NPM-based reforms depends heavily on institutional capacity, leadership quality, and contextual fit with a country's political and administrative environment. In Indonesia, implementing NPM principles in civil service management continues to face significant challenges, particularly the lack of standardised performance evaluation systems, weak accountability mechanisms, and poor alignment between performance appraisal and career development systems. Nevertheless, the merit system remains a strategic instrument for reinforcing NPM principles in Indonesia's bureaucracy, provided it is adapted to institutional capacities and local contexts.

The Concept of Good Governance and Institutional Legitimacy

The concept of *good governance* has become a normative paradigm in public sector reform discourse since the 1990s, promoted by multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). UNDP (2018) defines good governance as a system of values, policies, and institutions through which a society manages its economic, political, and social affairs via interactions among the state, civil society, and the private sector, grounded in six core principles: participation, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality, the rule of law, and accountability (UNDP, 2018; Elahi, 2009).

In the context of bureaucratic reform, good governance is not only concerned with the quality of policy and regulation but also with the quality of human resources implementing those policies, namely, civil servants who are professional, competent, and have integrity. The merit system is viewed as a fundamental instrument for building a bureaucracy that upholds sound governance principles, particularly in the dimensions of effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, accountability, and integrity in public service. The meritocratic principle is

considered essential in ensuring professionalism and neutrality within the civil service, which in turn enhances public trust in government institutions and reinforces institutional legitimacy (McCourt, 2015; UNDP, 2015).

In Indonesia, the implementation of the merit system is seen as a strategic effort to reduce corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), which have long undermined the integrity of government institutions. Empirical studies demonstrate that government agencies consistently applying the merit system tend to perform better on good governance indicators, such as transparency in promotions, accountability in budget use, and improved public satisfaction with service quality (Prasojo & Kurniawan, 2019, as cited in the original document). Therefore, the merit system plays not only an internal role in improving civil service performance but also an external one, strengthening legitimacy, accountability, and public confidence in the government as a whole.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a narrative literature review approach, which aims to compile, analyse, and interpret various scholarly sources in a systematic yet flexible manner to address conceptually oriented research questions. Unlike meta-analysis, which seeks to measure quantitative effects, this approach focuses on theoretical reasoning and the interpretation of thematic patterns emerging from the reviewed literature (Snyder, 2019). Through a narrative review, the researcher integrates theories, empirical research findings, policies, and relevant regulatory documents to construct a comprehensive argument regarding the implementation of the merit system within the context of Indonesia's bureaucratic reform.

The data sources for this study were derived from academic publications, including nationally and internationally accredited journals, scholarly books, institutional reports (such as those from the Civil Service Commission/KASN and the National Civil Service Agency/BKN), as well as government policy documents published after 2015. The selection of literature was conducted purposively, considering the relevance of each source to the topics of the merit system, civil service (ASN), and bureaucratic reform. The review also takes into account Indonesia's local context to ensure that the findings remain relevant to national policy needs. Using the narrative approach, this study not only compiles information but also reconstructs a conceptual narrative that reveals the interconnections between theory, policy, and practice. In doing so, it critically identifies the challenges and opportunities in implementing the merit system as part of the ongoing transformation toward a professional and performance-based bureaucracy in Indonesia.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tension Between Political Patronage and the Merit System

One of the most significant findings from the literature review is the structural tension between entrenched political patronage practices and the efforts to implement the merit system in Indonesia. Berenschot (2018), through his ethnographic study in Lampung, identified that the legacy of the New Order's authoritarian system created a bureaucracy with strong discretionary control over the allocation of state resources, thereby incentivising politicians to prioritise loyalty over competence in personnel appointments. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the direct election system, which intensifies competition to control public resources, where bureaucratic appointments are often used as instruments to gain electoral support and consolidate political power over resource distribution.

This patronage manifests in various forms, ranging from the "buying and selling of positions" to appointments based on personal or emotional closeness. Dwiputrianti (2018) found that transactional costs for public office positions in local governments could reach up to IDR 35 trillion annually nationwide, illustrating the scale of the *spoils system* practices that fundamentally contradict meritocratic principles. Mahyudin et al. (2025) further emphasise that despite the existence of a strong legal framework, such as Law No. 5 of 2014, and the establishment of the Civil Service Commission (KASN), political patronage and cultural biases continue to obstruct the full realisation of meritocratic principles, particularly at the local government level.

This tension creates a "mutual symbiosis" between politicians seeking electoral support and bureaucrats pursuing career advancement, resulting in a hybrid system that combines elements of both merit and patronage. Blunt et al. (2012) demonstrated that in Indonesia's patronage-based democracy, the merit system is complex to uphold because politicians have strong incentives to maintain control over civil service recruitment and promotion. Consequently, the appointment of structural officials often fails to match educational qualifications and required competencies, reducing bureaucratic effectiveness and eroding public trust in the integrity of the civil service system.

Institutional Capacity Gaps in Merit System Implementation

A second recurring finding across the literature is the significant gap between Indonesia's relatively comprehensive regulatory framework for the merit system and the institutional capacity to implement it, particularly at the regional government level. Dwiputrianti (2018) identified several key barriers to merit system implementation, including institutional unpreparedness for open recruitment, limited budgets, the absence of adequate *assessment*

centres, and the shortage of qualified functional assessors. As a result, compliance levels among government institutions vary widely, with local governments generally showing lower implementation capacity compared to national agencies.

Malik and Prasojo (2023) further highlight that strong traditions of primordialism, patronage, and nepotism at multiple levels of government fundamentally affect human resource management. They argue that achieving comprehensive merit system implementation in pursuit of *Indonesia Emas 2045* requires strengthening institutional capacity and capability, ensuring system transparency and impartiality, empowering civil servants, and promoting effective leadership as key determinants.

This capacity gap is also reflected in the unequal distribution of qualified human resources, as regions outside Java face greater challenges in recruiting and retaining talent due to limited access to education and professional opportunities. Empirical data show that these institutional disparities have a direct impact on the effectiveness of merit system oversight. Of the 830 cases of civil service neutrality violations reported to KASN, only 67.2% (416 cases) were followed up with sanctions, revealing weak enforcement capacity (East Asia Forum, 2025). Moreover, the absence of standardised competency frameworks has led to partial competency assessments and non-systematic career rotation practices.

Bridging this capacity gap requires substantial investments in *assessment centre infrastructure, assessor training programs, and the harmonisation* of inter-agency personnel management information systems to ensure consistent and measurable implementation of the merit system across all levels of government.

Digital Transformation as a Catalyst for Accelerating the Merit System

The third significant finding indicates that digital transformation has emerged as a potential catalyst for strengthening merit system implementation by enhancing transparency, objectivity, and efficiency in personnel management processes. The introduction of the *Computer Assisted Test* (CAT) in civil service recruitment since 2013 has demonstrated a significant positive impact in reducing fraudulent practices and increasing assessment objectivity (Dwiputrianti, 2018). Digital platforms such as *SmartASN*, developed by the National Civil Service Agency (BKN), aim to cultivate digitally skilled talent and leadership capable of transforming Indonesia's bureaucracy into a world-class system in the era of Industry 4.0. These systems utilise artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics to generate more objective and holistic evaluations (Afisa et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Afisa et al. (2023) identified that *SIPINTER* (*Sistem Informasi Penilaian Mandiri Implementasi Sistem Merit* Self-Assessment Information System for Merit System Implementation) represents a revolutionary innovation in human resource management in Indonesia. By leveraging advanced AI and data analytics, SIPINTER enables structured, accurate, and equitable evaluations, overcoming the subjectivity and manipulation common in traditional appraisal systems. The platform allows KASN to map merit system implementation across 34 ministries, 13 non-ministerial government agencies, and 34 provincial governments in a standardised, real-time manner, thereby strengthening accountability and supporting data-driven decision-making.

However, the implementation of digital technologies within the merit system faces substantial challenges. Indonesia continues to experience a significant digital divide, particularly in remote regions with limited IT infrastructure (World Bank, 2024). Additionally, variations in digital literacy among civil servants necessitate significant investments in training and capacity development. Data security and privacy have also emerged as critical issues that must be carefully managed in digital personnel systems.

Nevertheless, digital transformation remains a strategic opportunity to enhance transparency, efficiency, and accountability in the implementation of the merit system, provided it is supported by adequate infrastructure investment, human resource development, and a robust regulatory framework.

Organisational Cultural Resistance to Meritocratic Change

A fourth recurring theme is organisational cultural resistance to the transition toward a meritocratic system, deeply rooted in traditional values and longstanding patrimonial bureaucratic practices. Berenschot (2018) identified a "cultural dualism" in Indonesia's bureaucracy, namely, the tension between Weberian formal rationality and traditional loyalties based on personal relationships and primordial affiliations. Within this context, the shift toward a merit-based system is not merely a technical or administrative reform. However, it requires a fundamental transformation of organisational culture from personal relationship-based practices to competence-based professionalism.

This resistance is exacerbated by the perception among senior bureaucrats that seniority and tenure outweigh technical competence in determining promotions, creating generational conflicts with younger civil servants who are more exposed to modern meritocratic values (Malik & Prasojo, 2023). The persistence of hereditary leadership traditions (the *breed system*) in village head appointments illustrates how patronage can produce authoritarian leaders while simultaneously providing localised political stability. Additionally, the Javanese cultural

emphasis on harmony and avoidance of open conflict often hinders the implementation of strict and transparent performance evaluations.

The weakness of internal accountability culture further contributes to the problem that poor performance rarely incurs appropriate sanctions, while outstanding achievements are not always rewarded proportionately. Mahyudin et al. (2025) argue that despite the existence of a legal merit framework, cultural biases that favour dominant groups continue to shape subjective definitions of "merit," which can inadvertently reinforce social stratification by legitimising the success of already advantaged individuals while marginalising others.

Transforming this organisational culture requires multi-level interventions, including structured *change management* programs, the development of transformational leadership, consistent *reward and punishment* systems, and sustained campaigns promoting professionalism, integrity, and accountability as core bureaucratic values.

Independent Oversight and Merit System Accountability

The final theme highlights the crucial role of independent oversight in ensuring accountability in merit system implementation, while also revealing structural weaknesses in existing monitoring mechanisms. The establishment of the Civil Service Commission (KASN) in 2014 marked an important milestone in Indonesia's bureaucratic reform, with a mandate to oversee and monitor merit system implementation across all government institutions (Dwiputrianti, 2018). KASN has developed comprehensive indicators to guide the transition from a spoils-based to a merit-based bureaucracy and has periodically mapped implementation progress at both central and regional levels.

However, the effectiveness of KASN's oversight has been constrained by several fundamental limitations. The *East Asia Forum* (2025) reported that of 830 civil service neutrality violations received by KASN, only 67.2% were followed up with sanctions, highlighting weak enforcement capacity. More alarmingly, the dismantling of KASN's mandate through Law No. 20 of 2023 and Presidential Regulations No. 91 and 92 of 2024, which transferred its oversight functions to the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PANRB) and the National Civil Service Agency (BKN), has raised serious concerns regarding the independence of merit oversight.

Placing supervisory functions within the same executive branch that is being monitored creates a fundamental conflict of interest, potentially politicising oversight processes and undermining the professionalisation gains achieved thus far. This issue is further compounded by Indonesia's ranking 65th out of 141 countries in the global civil service meritocracy index, lagging behind most ASEAN peers (East Asia Forum, 2025).

To strengthen oversight mechanisms, the literature recommends establishing a new independent supervisory body equipped with strong safeguards and enforcement authority, regular publication of comprehensive oversight reports to ensure public transparency and accountability, and learning from international best practices such as New Zealand's independent oversight agencies and Canada's *blind review* processes, both of which have proven effective in minimizing bias in merit-based public sector appointments.

5. CONCLUSION

This article originates from a fundamental research question: *What are the dynamics, challenges, and opportunities in implementing the merit system policy within the context of bureaucratic reform and the enhancement of civil service performance in Indonesia?* Through a comprehensive narrative literature review, this study concludes that the implementation of the merit system in Indonesia faces multidimensional complexities rooted in structural tensions between the legacy of political patronage and the ongoing efforts to modernise a merit-based bureaucracy.

Although a progressive regulatory framework has been established through Law No. 5 of 2014 on the State Civil Apparatus and the creation of supervisory institutions such as the Civil Service Commission (KASN), the realisation of meritocratic principles remains hindered by the persistence of clientelism, institutional capacity constraints, organisational cultural resistance, and the weakening of independent oversight mechanisms.

This study identifies five key findings through thematic and triangulated literature analysis. First, there exists an inherent tension between political patronage and the merit system, where direct elections create incentives for politicians to prioritise loyalty over competence in appointments, resulting in a hybrid system combining elements of meritocracy and the spoils system. Second, significant institutional capacity gaps between central and local governments hinder effective implementation, evident in wide variations in compliance levels, limited assessment centres, and the scarcity of qualified assessors. Third, digital transformation through platforms such as CAT, SmartASN, and SIPINTER offers a potential catalyst to enhance transparency and objectivity, although challenges persist regarding the digital divide and technological literacy. Fourth, entrenched organisational cultural resistance rooted in patrimonial and seniority-based values necessitates a fundamental cultural transformation toward competence-based professionalism. Fifth, the weakening of independent oversight mechanisms exacerbated by the dissolution of KASN's mandate poses a serious threat to accountability and the sustainability of merit system reforms.

These findings confirm that the implementation of the merit system is not merely a technical–administrative reform, but rather a political-cultural transformation process that requires fundamental changes in political incentive structures, institutional capacities, and organisational values. The study also reveals that, although Indonesia has made significant progress in regulatory and institutional dimensions, the wide gap between policy and practice remains a critical challenge that calls for comprehensive and sustained interventions.

This research acknowledges several limitations. First, as a narrative literature review, it relies on existing secondary sources and may not fully capture the most recent dynamics of implementation at the field level. Second, limited access to primary empirical data and in-depth case studies from diverse regions restricts a more nuanced analysis of regional variations. Third, the study does not extensively explore comparative dimensions with other Southeast Asian countries facing similar governance contexts. Fourth, it does not analyse in detail the economic cost-benefit aspects of merit system implementation, which are crucial for policy justification. Fifth, limited literature reflecting civil servants' perspectives and lived experiences constrains a holistic understanding of the micro-level impacts of the merit system.

Based on the findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of the merit system: a). Re-establish independent oversight mechanisms through the creation of a new supervisory body with stronger enforcement powers and safeguards against political interference; b). Invest massively in institutional capacity building at the local level, including the establishment of assessment centres, assessor training programs, and standardised personnel information systems; c). Accelerate inclusive digital transformation by addressing the digital divide through ICT infrastructure development and improved digital literacy among civil servants; d). Implement a systematic change management program to transform organisational culture toward professionalism and integrity; e). Conduct further empirical mixed-methods research to capture the complexity of local-level implementation and identify replicable best practices.

Looking ahead, comparative research with other ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand could provide valuable insights into adaptive strategies for merit system implementation within the Asian governance context. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the long-term impact of merit system reforms on bureaucratic performance and public service quality. Ultimately, the active engagement of academics, practitioners, and civil society in merit system policy dialogues is essential to ensure that Indonesia's bureaucratic reform continues on a path that is democratic, professional, and accountable, paving the way toward the vision of *Indonesia Emas 2045*.

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