

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MERIT SYSTEM IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN SOUTH BURU REGENCY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of the merit system in the promotion and transfer of civil servants within the Regional Secretariat of South Buru Regency, Indonesia. Despite formal regulations mandating merit-based human resource management, personnel decisions in local governments often remain vulnerable to political influence. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study applies the policy implementation framework of Van Meter and Van Horn to analyze policy standards, resources, inter-organizational communication, and implementer disposition. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis involving key administrative actors. The findings reveal that although merit system standards are clearly regulated and widely acknowledged, their implementation remains largely symbolic. Limited human resource capacity, fragmented personnel data systems, weak coordination, and inconsistent commitment among implementing actors undermine substantive compliance. Political considerations continue to shape promotion and transfer decisions, negatively affecting professionalism, employee morale, and organizational effectiveness. This study contributes to public administration literature by demonstrating how political dynamics and institutional constraints hinder merit system implementation at the local level and highlights the need for stronger operational guidelines, capacity building, transparency, and accountability mechanisms.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-regional head election dynamics in Indonesia, whether involving governors, regents, or mayors, are frequently characterized by changes in positions within the State Civil Apparatus, including promotions, transfers, and removals from structural posts (Davis et al., 2025). Normatively, such actions are legally justified, as regional autonomy grants elected leaders authority over organizational structures and human resource management within local

governments (Djokja et al., 2025). However, empirical evidence shows that these personnel decisions are often influenced by political interests and subjective considerations rather than objective assessments of competence and performance (Dwiputrianti, 2023).

This phenomenon reflects the persistent use of bureaucracy as an instrument of political power. Regional heads simultaneously occupy political and administrative roles, providing them with significant leverage to control bureaucratic structures through strategic personnel placement (Dwiputrianti & others, 2023; Hakiman & Sheely, 2023). Consequently, appointments to key positions are frequently determined by political loyalty, personal proximity, or electoral contributions rather than merit-based criteria (Husen & Selanno, 2023). Such practices exemplify bureaucratic politicization, whereby political actors exert control over administrative institutions to consolidate power (Majogoro et al., 2025).

Bureaucratic politicization is reinforced through reciprocal relationships between political officials and civil servants (OECD, 2021). Political leaders depend on bureaucratic support to secure electoral success, while civil servants expect career advancement, promotions, or access to strategic positions in return (Malik, 2023) : (Balla & Lodge, 2021). This exchange creates incentives for civil servants to engage in political behavior, particularly during regional elections, as support for winning candidates often results in favorable career outcomes, whereas alignment with losing candidates may lead to demotion or marginalization (Muabuay, 2025; Praharsa, 2025). These dynamics erode bureaucratic professionalism and detach personnel management from organizational needs and public service objectives (Malik & others, 2023).

At the structural level, bureaucratic politicization is primarily driven by political patronage and policy control motives. Patronage practices distribute positions as rewards for electoral support, severely undermining the integrity of personnel management systems (Rahman et al., 2025). Simultaneously, policy control motivates executives to place loyal individuals in strategic bureaucratic positions to ensure compliance, marginalizing civil servants perceived as politically non-aligned regardless of their qualifications or performance (Ridwan, 2024). As a result, transfers and promotions—intended as tools for performance evaluation and career development—are transformed into political instruments, weakening civil service professionalism and institutional capacity (Sakir, 2024; Sakir, 2025).

These practices stand in direct contradiction to Indonesia's civil service legal framework, which mandates the application of a merit system based on qualifications, competencies, and performance (Sebunya & Gichuki, 2024). Conceptually, the merit system is designed to establish a professional, performance-oriented bureaucracy that promotes fairness, accountability, and service quality while preventing political interference (Selanno & Rahawarin, 2024). However, local-level implementation often deviates substantially from these regulatory ideals (Hupe et al., 2020).

Empirical conditions in the Regional Secretariat of South Buru Regency illustrate this gap. Previous findings indicate that promotion and transfer processes following the inauguration of regional leaders remain heavily influenced by political considerations, frequently bypassing formal mechanisms such as open selection procedures and institutional advisory bodies (Sakir et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2025). As a consequence, civil servants with strong performance records may be sidelined, while individuals with political connections occupy strategic positions. This situation negatively affects employee morale, organizational culture, and long-term institutional effectiveness, while also diminishing public trust in local government institutions.

Despite extensive discussions on bureaucratic politicization and merit system principles, existing studies have largely focused on normative frameworks or general bureaucratic behavior, with limited empirical attention to how merit system implementation operates within specific local government institutions following electoral transitions. This research gap highlights the need for an in-depth examination of merit system implementation in civil service human resource management at the local level. Accordingly, this study investigates promotion and transfer practices within the Regional Secretariat of South Buru Regency to identify deviations from merit-based principles and to

formulate strategies for strengthening objective, transparent, and performance-oriented civil service management in support of bureaucratic reform and improved local governance.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research approach to develop an in-depth understanding of how the merit system is implemented in human resource management, particularly in promotion and transfer practices within the Regional Secretariat of South Buru Regency. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it enables the exploration of institutional practices, power relations, and administrative dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement. This approach allows the study to examine the extent to which merit-based principles—such as qualifications, competencies, and performance—are applied in actual bureaucratic decision-making processes.

The research focuses on the procedural mechanisms governing promotions and transfers, the consistency of their implementation with merit system principles, and the factors that constrain objective personnel management. In addition, the study explores the implications of non-merit-based practices for employee professionalism, organizational performance, and institutional effectiveness. By emphasizing both process and impact, the study provides a contextual understanding of merit system implementation within the local bureaucratic setting.

The study was conducted at the Regional Secretariat of South Buru Regency, Maluku Province, which holds a central role in coordinating administrative and civil service management at the local government level. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with direct involvement and experience in promotion and transfer processes, including decision-makers, technical officers, and civil servants affected by these policies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis, enabling the researcher to capture both experiential perspectives and institutional evidence.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This analytical process was applied iteratively throughout the study to identify patterns, relationships, and deviations from merit-based principles. Triangulation across data sources and informants was used to enhance credibility and analytical rigor. Through this systematic approach, the study offers a comprehensive portrayal of merit system implementation and its implications for bureaucratic professionalism and governance quality in South Buru Regency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study analyze the implementation of the merit system in the promotion and transfer of civil servants at the Secretariat of South Buru Regency using the policy implementation model of Van Meter and Van Horn. This model views implementation as an interactive process shaped by policy standards and objectives, resources, communication and coordination, and the disposition of implementing actors within specific political and administrative environments. Applying this framework allows the study to move beyond formal regulatory compliance and examine how institutional capacity and actor behavior jointly determine the success or failure of merit-based human resource management at the local level.

Policy Standards and Objectives in the Implementation of the Merit System

Within the Van Meter and Van Horn framework, clear policy standards and objectives are essential conditions for effective implementation. In South Buru Regency, the merit system governing promotions and transfers is formally regulated by national civil service policies that emphasize qualifications, competence, and performance. Empirical findings show that these standards are generally well understood and acknowledged by implementing actors. Merit

principles are explicitly referenced in internal documents and official discourse, indicating that ambiguity at the policy formulation level is not the primary source of implementation problems.

However, the study identifies a persistent gap between formal standards and operational practice. Although merit objectives are clearly articulated, their translation into binding procedures remains weak. Promotion and transfer decisions are frequently shaped by non-merit considerations, reflecting what Van Meter and Van Horn describe as implementation failure arising from weak linkage between policy intent and administrative action. The absence of enforceable operational indicators further dilutes policy standards, as performance and competency assessments function more as administrative formalities than as decisive instruments. This condition suggests that clarity of policy objectives alone is insufficient to ensure implementation success when institutional incentives and control mechanisms are weak.

Resources and Capacity Supporting Merit System Implementation

Resource availability constitutes another critical variable in the Van Meter and Van Horn model. The findings reveal that limited human resource capacity significantly constrains merit system implementation in South Buru Regency. Officials involved in staffing decisions often lack technical competence in competency mapping, performance evaluation, and job analysis, reducing their ability to apply merit-based criteria consistently. Consequently, decision-making relies heavily on subjective judgment rather than systematic assessment.

In addition, fragmented personnel data systems undermine evidence-based decision-making. Performance records and competency profiles are not fully integrated, limiting their practical use in promotion and transfer processes. Institutional authority is formally established, yet coordination among staffing-related units remains weak, allowing executive discretion to override professional recommendations. These conditions illustrate a structural implementation failure, where inadequate resources and uneven authority distribution prevent policy objectives from being realized, despite formal compliance with regulatory requirements.

Inter-Organizational Communication and Coordination in Merit System Implementation

Effective communication and coordination are central to maintaining policy coherence in the Van Meter and Van Horn framework. This study finds that while merit system principles are formally communicated through regulations and guidelines, operational communication among implementing actors is inconsistent. Differences in interpretation across organizational units result in uneven application of merit-based procedures.

Coordination among key institutions involved in personnel management tends to be procedural rather than substantive. Forums for coordination often serve to legitimize decisions instead of critically assessing candidate suitability based on merit indicators. Hierarchical communication patterns further weaken the role of technical assessments, as feedback from professional units is not always incorporated into final decisions. Limited coordination with oversight institutions also reduces external control, reinforcing a pattern of symbolic rather than substantive implementation. These findings highlight how weak communication structures contribute to implementation failure by allowing discretionary practices to persist.

Disposition and Commitment of Implementing Actors in Merit System Implementation

The disposition of implementing actors plays a decisive role in determining implementation outcomes. The study shows that while there is broad normative acceptance of merit system principles, substantive commitment remains inconsistent. Implementers often comply procedurally but prioritize non-merit considerations when making final decisions, particularly for strategic positions. This gap between formal acceptance and practical commitment reflects weak implementer disposition within the Van Meter and Van Horn framework.

Variations in commitment are evident across actor categories. Technical personnel tend to support merit-based practices more strongly, whereas actors with greater discretionary authority display ambivalence when merit recommendations conflict with political or organizational interests. Risk-averse behavior and the absence of clear reward and sanction mechanisms further reduce incentives for consistent compliance. From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the argument that policy implementation failure is not solely a function of unclear rules or limited resources, but also of weak actor commitment and insufficient reinforcement mechanisms that undermine the internalization of policy objectives.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of the merit system in the promotion and transfer of civil servants at the Secretariat of South Buru Regency reflects a pattern of partial and symbolic compliance rather than substantive adherence. Using the Van Meter and Van Horn policy implementation model, it becomes evident that although policy standards and objectives related to the merit system are formally clear and well-articulated at the national level, their operationalization at the local level remains inconsistent. This gap confirms the theoretical argument that clarity of policy alone is insufficient to ensure effective implementation when local political interests, informal practices, and weak institutionalization intervene. The persistence of non-merit considerations in personnel decisions indicates that policy objectives aimed at professionalism and neutrality have not been fully internalized as shared organizational values.

From a resource and capacity perspective, the study reinforces Van Meter and Van Horn's assertion that inadequate resources significantly constrain implementation outcomes. Limited technical competence among human resource managers, fragmented personnel data systems, and insufficient budget allocation for capacity building collectively weaken the ability of implementing actors to apply merit-based criteria objectively. These constraints lead to an overreliance on discretionary judgment and reduce the functional role of performance appraisals and competency assessments. Consequently, the merit system operates more as an administrative requirement than as an evidence-based management instrument. This condition illustrates how resource limitations can distort policy intent and reduce implementation effectiveness, even in the presence of formal authority structures.

Furthermore, weaknesses in inter-organizational communication, coordination, and implementer disposition emerge as critical explanatory factors in this study. Hierarchical and top-down communication patterns, limited transparency, and weak horizontal coordination with oversight institutions diminish accountability and allow deviations from merit principles to persist. At the same time, the ambivalent commitment of key decision-makers highlights the importance of implementer disposition in shaping policy outcomes. As emphasized by Van Meter and Van Horn, the success of policy implementation is strongly influenced by the willingness and motivation of actors to prioritize policy goals over competing interests. In the case of South Buru Regency, the lack of strong incentive and sanction mechanisms further undermines commitment, resulting in selective implementation. Overall, this discussion confirms the relevance of the Van Meter and Van Horn model in explaining why merit system implementation remains suboptimal, underscoring the need for integrated improvements in standards enforcement, capacity building, communication, and actor commitment to achieve meaningful reform in human resource management.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of the merit system in the promotion and transfer of civil servants at the Secretariat of South Buru Regency remains largely formalistic. Although merit-based standards and objectives are clearly regulated, their practical application is frequently undermined by political considerations, personal proximity, and informal networks. Consistent with the Van Meter and Van Horn policy implementation model, these

findings demonstrate that implementation failure is not caused by the absence of policy clarity, but by weak operationalization, limited institutional capacity, ineffective coordination, and uneven commitment among implementing actors.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on policy implementation by reinforcing the argument that formal compliance does not guarantee substantive implementation, particularly in politically embedded bureaucratic contexts. Empirically, it confirms that policy implementation failure emerges from the interaction of structural constraints and actor behavior, highlighting the importance of disposition, resources, and communication in shaping outcomes. Practically, the study recommends strengthening operational guidelines, enhancing human resource capacity, integrating transparent personnel information systems, and reinforcing coordination and accountability mechanisms. These measures are essential to transform the merit system from symbolic adherence into effective practice that supports professionalism and bureaucratic performance.

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