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Bureaucratic Meritocracy through Talent Management Implementation in Filling Supervisory and Administrative Positions in Balikpapan City Government

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of talent management in filling supervisory and administrative positions within the Government of Balikpapan City, focusing on its role in operationalizing bureaucratic meritocracy. Using a qualitative approach with a case study strategy, the research explores how merit-based principles are translated into practice and identifies the dynamics influencing decision-making processes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation, and observation, and analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. The findings indicate that talent management has been formally adopted through instruments such as competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pools; however, its implementation remains inconsistent, revealing a gap between procedural frameworks and substantive outcomes. Non-merit factors, including seniority, informal networks, organizational loyalty, and political considerations, continue to influence decisions, resulting in a hybrid form of meritocracy shaped by the interaction between formal systems and socio-political realities. Position filling emerges as a critical locus where meritocratic principles are tested, as it represents the stage at which competing considerations are negotiated and translated into actual decisions. The study underscores the importance of leadership commitment, institutional capacity, and organizational culture in ensuring the effectiveness of merit-based systems. Strengthening these dimensions is essential to transform meritocracy from a procedural requirement into a substantive practice that promotes fairness, professionalism, and organizational performance, while contributing to broader public sector reform at the local government level. The study contributes theoretically to the discourse on bureaucratic reform and merit system development by conceptualizing “hybrid meritocracy” as a structural governance condition in which formal merit-based systems coexist with informal political and organizational power relations, thereby demonstrating the limitations of procedural reform in transforming substantive bureaucratic practices.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Meritocracy, Talent Management, Position Filling

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INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia has increasingly emphasized the institutionalization of merit-based systems to enhance the professionalism, accountability, and performance of public administration. Central to this agenda is the implementation of talent management as a strategic instrument to ensure that the placement of civil servants aligns with competence, qualifications, and organizational needs. In this context, bureaucratic meritocracy is not merely a normative principle but also a practical framework that guides the recruitment, development, and promotion of personnel, particularly in strategic structural positions such as supervisory and administrative roles. These positions play a crucial role in translating policy directives into operational practices, thereby directly influencing the effectiveness of governance at the local level (Croese et al., 2021; Salvador & Sancho, 2021).

The Indonesian government has formalized its commitment to meritocracy through various regulatory frameworks, including the development of a merit system within the State Civil Apparatus (Prasetyo & Zaenal Arifin, 2026; Vikalista et al., 2026). Talent management, as an integral part of this system, aims to identify high-potential employees, map competencies, and ensure leadership continuity. However, despite the advancement of regulatory frameworks, the practical implementation of merit-based talent management often encounters structural, cultural, and political challenges. Patronage practices, limited institutional capacity, and inconsistencies in competency assessment mechanisms are among the factors that may hinder the realization of a fully meritocratic bureaucracy (Chitamba & Pillay, 2025). Consequently, a gap persists between formal policy design and empirical practice at the local government level.

Previous studies have examined merit systems and talent management in the public sector, however, most have focused on normative aspects, policy design, or general evaluations at the national level. These studies tend to position meritocracy as an ideal framework without sufficiently exploring how it is operationalized in everyday bureaucratic practices, particularly within local governments (Guneyi, 2025). Moreover, research on talent management has largely emphasized human resource development aspects, such as competency mapping and career development, without explicitly linking them to the strategic process of filling structural positions. In fact, the appointment of supervisory and administrative positions constitutes a critical juncture where meritocratic principles are tested in practice, as non-merit factors such as patronage, seniority, and political considerations often emerge at this stage (Zafarullah & Sarker, 2021).

In this context, empirical studies that explicitly connect the implementation of talent management with the practice of meritocracy in filling structural positions at the local government level remain limited, particularly in Indonesia. Variations in institutional capacity, organizational culture, and local political dynamics have also not been comprehensively explored in the existing literature (Domorenok et al., 2021; El Mazyani et al., 2025). As a result, a conceptual and empirical gap persists between the understanding of merit systems and their practical implementation in the field.

The Government of Balikpapan City provides a relevant case for examining these dynamics, given its reputation for administrative innovation and relatively

strong governance performance (Afrianto et al., 2025; Firmani et al., 2025). As a rapidly developing urban area, Balikpapan faces increasing demands for efficient public service delivery and adaptive governance structures. Therefore, the implementation of talent management in filling supervisory and administrative positions becomes a critical arena for assessing the extent to which meritocratic principles are practiced within local bureaucracy (Oliveira et al., 2024).

This study offers novelty by integrating the concepts of bureaucratic meritocracy and talent management into a more comprehensive analytical framework, while positioning the filling of supervisory and administrative positions as the primary locus for examining meritocracy in practice. Furthermore, this research uncovers the interaction between structural, cultural, and political dimensions in the implementation of talent management, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of bureaucratic reform at the local level. Accordingly, this study not only contributes empirically through a case study of the Balikpapan City Government but also enriches the theoretical discourse on strengthening merit-based systems in public governance (Kurniawati & Saprudin, 2025).

Bureaucratic meritocracy in Indonesia has frequently encountered a substantial gap between formal regulatory frameworks and practical implementation at the local government level. Although merit-based systems have been institutionally promoted through talent management policies and competency-based personnel mechanisms, empirical realities continue to demonstrate the persistence of implementation failures. Several studies indicate that the appointment and promotion of bureaucratic officials are still influenced by informal patronage networks, political intervention, seniority considerations, and organizational loyalty that often override objective competency standards. In many local governments, talent management instruments are formally adopted as procedural requirements; however, their implementation tends to be administrative rather than substantive, resulting in symbolic compliance without fully transforming bureaucratic behavior and decision-making practices. This condition reflects that meritocracy in practice is frequently negotiated within broader socio-political structures rather than functioning as a purely objective administrative mechanism.

In this regard, the relationship between talent management and meritocracy should not be understood in a linear or purely technical manner. Talent management does not automatically produce meritocratic outcomes simply through the existence of competency mapping, assessment systems, or talent pools. Instead, its implementation is deeply shaped by institutional capacity, organizational culture, and political power relations that determine how merit principles are interpreted, adapted, or even selectively applied in bureaucratic practice. Therefore, meritocracy in public administration emerges as a contested and dynamic process in which formal administrative systems continuously interact with informal institutional realities. This perspective moves beyond normative assumptions by positioning talent management as a site of negotiation between procedural rationality and contextual bureaucratic interests.

The novelty of this study lies not only in examining talent management within local bureaucracy, but also in critically positioning position filling as the central locus for testing the substantive operation of bureaucratic meritocracy. Previous studies generally emphasize merit systems from normative, legal, or human resource management perspectives, focusing primarily on competency development, procedural compliance, or institutional design. In contrast, this study

specifically analyzes how meritocratic principles are operationalized, contested, and negotiated during the process of filling supervisory and administrative positions, where formal systems directly encounter informal power dynamics. Furthermore, unlike prior studies that tend to discuss meritocracy in general administrative contexts, this research integrates structural, cultural, and political dimensions into a single analytical framework to explain the emergence of hybrid meritocracy within local governance practices.

The case of the Balikpapan City Government is particularly important within the broader context of bureaucratic reform in Indonesia. Despite being recognized as one of the local governments with relatively strong governance performance and administrative innovation, Balikpapan remains embedded within national bureaucratic structures characterized by uneven institutional capacity, political influence, and persistent patronage practices. This indicates that even relatively adaptive local governments are not fully insulated from broader structural challenges affecting the implementation of merit systems in Indonesia. Consequently, the Balikpapan case provides a strategic empirical setting for understanding how meritocracy is practiced, negotiated, and constrained within decentralized governance systems, while simultaneously reflecting broader tensions between formal bureaucratic reform agendas and empirical realities in Indonesian public administration.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze the implementation of talent management in filling supervisory and administrative positions in the Government of Balikpapan City and to assess the extent to which these practices reflect the principles of bureaucratic meritocracy. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the strengthening of policies and practices of bureaucratic reform that are more effective, transparent, and equitable.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study design not merely to describe bureaucratic phenomena, but to critically examine the interaction between formal merit-based systems and empirical bureaucratic practices within a specific institutional context. The qualitative approach is analytically grounded in the assumption that the implementation of meritocracy is socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by interactions among institutional structures, organizational culture, and political dynamics. Therefore, the study prioritizes interpretive understanding rather than measurement, enabling an in-depth exploration of how talent management mechanisms are operationalized, negotiated, and potentially distorted in the process of filling supervisory and administrative positions. The case study strategy is particularly relevant because the implementation of meritocracy cannot be separated from the organizational and political context in which bureaucratic decisions are produced (Furidha, 2024). Although this study focuses on a single case, namely the Government of Balikpapan City, the selection is analytically strategic rather than merely administrative. Balikpapan represents a local government with relatively strong governance performance and reform orientation, making it a critical case for examining whether meritocratic principles can operate effectively even within a comparatively adaptive bureaucratic environment. The absence of comparative cases is acknowledged as a limitation; however, this study does not aim to produce statistical generalization across regions. Instead, it seeks analytical generalization by generating contextual insights into the mechanisms, tensions, and contradictions underlying meritocracy implementation in local bureaucracy.

Focusing on a single case allows deeper exploration of institutional processes and hidden organizational dynamics that may not be adequately captured through broader comparative approaches (Makwae, 2021; Yueyue et al., 2024).

The selection of informants through purposive sampling was conducted based on specific analytical criteria to minimize subjective bias and ensure relevance to the research objectives. Informants were selected not only because of their formal positions, but also based on their direct involvement, decision-making authority, technical knowledge, and practical experience related to talent management and position-filling processes. These included officials from the Regional Personnel Agency, members involved in assessment and promotion mechanisms, supervisory officers, and bureaucratic actors directly engaged in staffing decisions. In addition, informants were chosen from different hierarchical and functional positions to capture varying perspectives and reduce the dominance of a single institutional narrative. This approach enabled cross-validation of information and strengthened the credibility of the empirical findings.

The use of secondary data in this study was not limited to supporting descriptive explanations, but functioned as an analytical instrument for comparing formal bureaucratic frameworks with empirical implementation practices. Regulatory documents, talent management guidelines, competency assessment reports, staffing records, and administrative procedures were systematically examined to identify formal meritocratic standards and procedural expectations. These formal documents were then compared with interview findings and observational data to assess the extent of alignment, inconsistency, or contradiction between normative regulations and actual bureaucratic practices. Through this comparative mechanism, the study was able to identify implementation gaps and reveal how formal meritocratic systems were adapted, negotiated, or selectively interpreted within organizational contexts.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed triangulation of sources, methods, and institutional perspectives as an interpretive rather than purely procedural strategy. Contradictions among interview statements, official documents, and observed practices were not treated as methodological weaknesses, but as important analytical findings reflecting tensions within bureaucratic implementation processes. Member checking was conducted selectively to verify factual interpretations while maintaining critical distance from institutional narratives. Furthermore, peer debriefing and iterative interpretation were applied to reduce researcher subjectivity and to critically examine emerging themes throughout the analytical process. This approach enabled the study to capture not only procedural consistency but also hidden discrepancies, competing interpretations, and contextual complexities surrounding the implementation of meritocracy in bureaucratic position filling. (Alam, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Talent Management as an Operational Mechanism of Meritocracy in Filling Positions

Talent management can be understood as a concrete operational mechanism through which the abstract principles of meritocracy are translated into actionable bureaucratic practices (Aman et al., 2026; Karataş, 2024). While meritocracy emphasizes fairness, competence, and equal opportunity in public personnel management, it often remains normative unless supported by systematic instruments. In this regard, talent management provides the procedural and analytical tools such as competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent

pooling that enable organizations to identify, develop, and position individuals based on merit-based criteria (Akar & Keser Özmantar, 2025; Akpoyibo, 2025).

Within the context of filling positions, particularly supervisory and administrative roles, talent management functions as a bridge between policy design and implementation. It structures decision-making processes by aligning individual capabilities with job requirements, thereby reducing subjectivity and minimizing the influence of non-merit factors. Through mechanisms such as assessment centers, succession planning, and data-driven evaluation systems, talent management ensures that appointments are grounded in measurable competencies and organizational needs (Ayesha Khan & Muhammad Rizwan, 2025)

However, the effectiveness of talent management as an operational mechanism of meritocracy depends not only on the availability of formal systems but also on the consistency of their application. Organizational culture, leadership commitment, and institutional capacity play significant roles in determining whether talent-based mechanisms are applied rigorously or selectively. Therefore, understanding talent management in this context requires not only examining its technical components but also analyzing how it interacts with broader structural and socio-political dynamics within the bureaucracy.

Empirical findings indicate that the implementation of talent management within the Government of Balikpapan City formally reflects the principles of bureaucratic meritocracy; however, substantive implementation remains inconsistent across decision-making processes. Although competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pool mechanisms have been institutionally established, interviews with bureaucratic actors reveal that these instruments often function primarily as administrative legitimization rather than as decisive determinants of appointment outcomes. In practice, several informants acknowledged that formal assessment results do not always guarantee appointment decisions, particularly when strategic organizational or political considerations emerge during the final stages of position filling. This demonstrates that meritocratic procedures operate within a broader institutional environment where formal standards coexist with informal bureaucratic negotiations.

The findings further reveal that meritocracy in bureaucratic practice cannot be interpreted as a purely objective administrative system because decision-making processes remain embedded within structural hierarchies and relational power dynamics. In several cases, seniority and organizational loyalty continued to function as informal indicators of “worthiness,” even when competency assessment results suggested alternative candidates with stronger technical qualifications. Informants also indicated that leadership preferences frequently influenced final appointments, particularly in positions considered strategically important for maintaining organizational stability and administrative control. As a result, talent management mechanisms were not entirely autonomous but operated selectively according to institutional and political priorities.

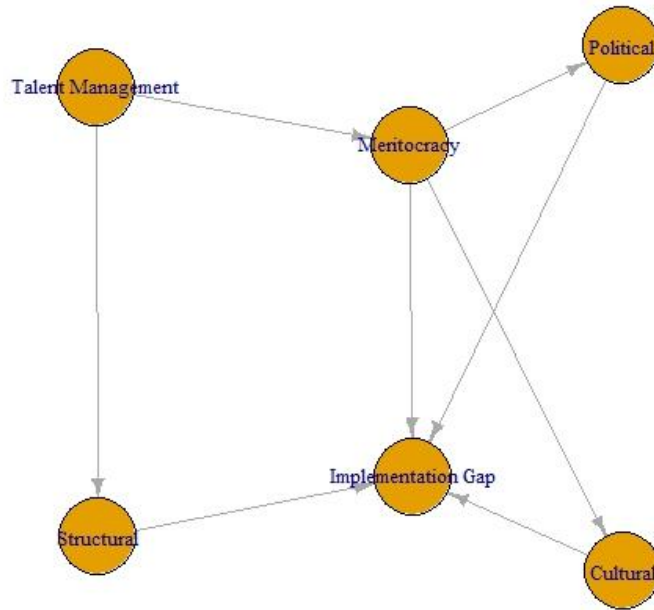


Figure 1 Visualisasi Talent Management as an Operational Mechanism of Meritocracy in Filling Positions.

Source Data Processed by the Nvivo12

Figure 1 the analysis of theme relations in this study indicates that the implementation of Talent Management as an Operational Mechanism of Meritocracy in Filling Positions is characterized by an interconnected and dynamic pattern. The findings reveal that talent management occupies a central position within the thematic structure, functioning as the primary linkage between the normative principles of meritocracy and their empirical manifestation in bureaucratic practice. In this regard, talent management is not merely an administrative tool but an operational system that translates merit-based principles into concrete decision-making processes.

The primary relationship is evident in the linkage between talent management and meritocracy, where talent management operationalizes core meritocratic values such as competence, objectivity, and transparency in the process of filling supervisory and administrative positions. This relationship underscores that, without systematic instruments, meritocracy tends to remain at the level of formal policy, whereas talent management provides the procedural and evaluative mechanisms necessary for its practical implementation. Accordingly, the strength of meritocratic implementation is highly dependent on the effectiveness and consistency of talent management practices (Malik & Prasajo, 2023).

However, this relationship is neither linear nor isolated. The study also identifies the influence of three contextual dimensions structural, cultural, and political that shape the interaction between talent management and meritocracy. The structural dimension plays a supportive role by providing regulatory frameworks, institutional arrangements, and formal procedures that facilitate merit-based practices. In contrast, the cultural dimension introduces organizational values such as seniority and loyalty, which, on the one hand, may reinforce internal cohesion but, on the other hand, may deviate from meritocratic principles. Meanwhile, the

political dimension reflects the presence of power relations and leadership influence that can affect decision-making processes, particularly in the appointment of strategic positions

The interaction among these dimensions ultimately contributes to the emergence of an implementation gap, reflecting a discrepancy between formal merit-based systems and actual practices in the field (Posselt et al., 2025). This gap indicates that the implementation of meritocracy through talent management is an ongoing process of negotiation among formal rules, organizational norms, and political interests. Therefore, the relationships among themes in this study not only illustrate causal linkages but also highlight the complexity of interactions shaping the outcomes of bureaucratic reform.

Interaction of Structural, Cultural, and Political Dimensions in the Practice of Meritocracy

The practice of meritocracy in public administration cannot be understood solely through formal rules and institutional arrangements; rather, it emerges from the interaction of multiple dimensions that shape how policies are implemented in real organizational settings. Among these, the structural, cultural, and political dimensions play a critical role in determining whether merit-based principles are translated into consistent and objective practices or become subject to contextual adaptations (Kosińska & Sikorska, 2026). The structural dimension refers to the formal framework that underpins meritocracy, including regulations, standard operating procedures, competency frameworks, and institutional mechanisms such as assessment systems and talent management platforms (Lee, 2024). This dimension provides the normative and procedural foundation necessary for ensuring that personnel decisions are based on qualifications, performance, and organizational needs. In principle, a strong structural framework enhances transparency, accountability, and fairness in the process of filling positions.

Implementation of meritocracy is also shaped by the cultural dimension, which encompasses shared values, norms, and informal practices within the organization. Elements such as seniority, loyalty, and organizational traditions often influence how formal rules are interpreted and applied (Yuana et al., 2025). While these cultural factors may contribute to organizational cohesion and stability, they can also create tensions with meritocratic principles when they prioritize relational or experiential considerations over objective criteria. In addition, the political dimension introduces another layer of complexity, as bureaucratic processes are often embedded within broader power relations and leadership dynamics. Decision-making in the appointment of positions may involve strategic considerations, negotiation, and the exercise of authority by key actors. This dimension does not necessarily negate meritocracy but can shape its application, particularly in contexts where leadership discretion and institutional interests intersect.

The interaction of these three dimensions results in a dynamic and often hybrid form of meritocracy in practice. Rather than being implemented in a purely technical or linear manner, merit-based systems are continuously negotiated within the interplay of formal structures, organizational culture, and political

influences. Understanding this interaction is therefore essential for explaining the gap between the ideal of meritocracy and its actual implementation in public sector organizations, as well as for identifying pathways to strengthen merit-based governance.

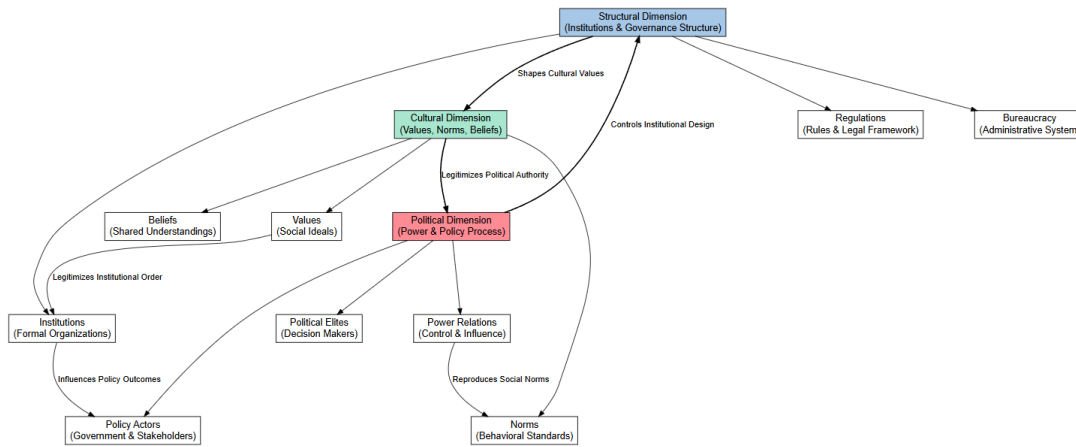


Figure 2 Framework of Structure, Culture and Politics

Source Data Processes by the Author 2026

The figure 2 represents a conceptual model demonstrating that the practice of meritocracy cannot be understood as a neutral system; rather, it emerges from dynamic interactions among structural, cultural, and political dimensions. The structural dimension serves as the foundational framework, encompassing institutions, regulations, and bureaucracy, which formally govern how meritocratic principles are applied in processes of selection, resource distribution, and decision-making. Institutions, as formal organizations, define operational mechanisms; regulations provide binding legal frameworks; and bureaucracy performs administrative functions to ensure that the system operates according to established procedures. This structure is not purely objective, as it is shaped by particular interests and simultaneously determines what is recognized as “merit” within a given social context.

The cultural dimension plays a crucial role in shaping and reproducing the values that underpin the legitimacy of meritocracy (Cheang & Choy, 2024). Values, norms, and beliefs constitute key elements in constructing collective understandings of fairness, hard work, and individual worthiness. This dimension does not operate independently; it is shaped by structural arrangements through processes of socialization and institutionalization, while also providing legitimacy to political authority. Meritocracy is sustained and accepted because of cultural constructions that persuade society of its fairness, even though, in practice, it may produce inequalities. The political dimension functions as the arena in which power is distributed and policies are formulated, ultimately influencing how meritocracy is implemented. Actors such as political elites, power relations, and policy-makers play strategic roles in controlling institutional design and determining the direction of public policy. The political dimension is influenced by cultural values that provide legitimacy and actively reproduces social norms through the exercise of power (Debbaut & De Kimpe, 2023). Existing power

relations may reinforce or distort meritocratic principles, depending on the dominant interests shaping political processes.

The interaction among these three dimensions reveals a complex and reciprocal relationship. The structural dimension shapes cultural values; these values, in turn, legitimize political authority; and political power subsequently controls and reconstructs institutional structures. Cross-dimensional relationships are also evident, such as how institutions influence policy outcomes, values legitimize institutional arrangements, and power relations reproduce social norms. Meritocracy therefore cannot be viewed as merely a technocratic mechanism based on individual achievement, but rather as a socio-political construct shaped by power relations, cultural values, and institutional structures that are deeply intertwined.

This reality critically tests the assumptions underlying talent management systems. Figures 1–3 should therefore not be understood merely as descriptive conceptual models, but as representations of institutional contradictions within bureaucratic reform processes. The interaction between structural, cultural, and political dimensions illustrates that meritocracy does not operate within a neutral administrative space. Instead, meritocratic systems are continuously negotiated through competing institutional logics. Structural arrangements provide procedural legitimacy, organizational culture normalizes relational practices such as seniority and loyalty, while political dynamics shape the boundaries of bureaucratic discretion. The findings thus reveal that bureaucratic reform is not only constrained by technical limitations, but also by the persistence of informal power relations embedded within organizational systems.

Rather than functioning as mutually separate dimensions, structural, cultural, and political factors interact recursively in shaping bureaucratic outcomes. Structural regulations formally promote meritocratic procedures, yet cultural norms and political interests frequently reinterpret these procedures in practice. This interaction creates a condition in which meritocracy is formally institutionalized but substantively fragmented. Accordingly, the implementation gap identified in this study does not simply reflect weak policy execution, but indicates deeper tensions between bureaucratic reform agendas and existing institutional realities within local governance structures.

Position Filling as a Critical Locus of Meritocracy Testing and Its Implications

The process of position filling, particularly for supervisory and administrative roles, represents a critical locus in which the principles of bureaucratic meritocracy are most concretely tested. While merit-based systems are often articulated at the level of policy and institutional design, their effectiveness becomes visible during decision-making moments related to appointments and promotions. At this stage, the alignment between formal criteria such as competence, qualifications, and performance and actual outcomes can be empirically observed. Position filling therefore functions as a practical arena where the integrity of the merit system is either reinforced or undermined. From an institutional perspective, position filling serves as the convergence point of various components of talent management, including competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pool utilization. These instruments are expected to operate in

an integrated manner to ensure that individuals selected for strategic roles are those who best meet the requirements of the position (Chen, 2023). Empirical findings indicate that this integration is not always consistent. In some cases, although formal mechanisms are in place, their application may be partial or selectively interpreted, leading to discrepancies between procedural compliance and substantive meritocracy.

The process of filling positions is highly susceptible to the influence of non-merit factors. Elements such as seniority norms, informal networks, organizational loyalty, and political considerations can shape decision-making outcomes (Podgórnjak-Krzykacz, 2021). This condition does not necessarily indicate the absence of meritocracy, but rather reflects the coexistence and interaction between meritocratic principles and contextual realities. The implementation of meritocracy in this locus tends to be hybrid in nature, reflecting a negotiation between formal systems and informal practices within the bureaucracy.

This condition strengthens the argument that the implementation of meritocracy in local bureaucracy tends to produce what can be conceptualized as hybrid meritocracy. Hybrid meritocracy refers not merely to the coexistence of merit and non-merit considerations, but to a structural condition in which formal meritocratic systems are institutionally maintained while simultaneously accommodating informal political and relational practices. In this context, meritocracy functions symbolically to provide procedural legitimacy, whereas substantive outcomes are often shaped through negotiation among bureaucratic elites, organizational interests, and political influence. Therefore, hybrid meritocracy should not be viewed simply as a transitional administrative condition, but as a governance pattern reflecting unresolved tensions between reform-oriented institutional frameworks and entrenched bureaucratic power structures.

The empirical analysis also demonstrates that non-merit actors possess significant influence in determining final appointment outcomes, particularly during the transition from technical assessment stages to executive decision-making processes. While lower-level administrative procedures generally adhered to competency-based mechanisms, the final stages of appointment frequently involved discretionary intervention from senior bureaucratic actors and institutional elites. Informants suggested that considerations such as political compatibility, interpersonal trust, leadership loyalty, and organizational pragmatism often became dominant factors when selecting candidates for strategic positions. Consequently, formal assessment results were sometimes adjusted, delayed, or selectively interpreted to align with broader organizational and political interests.

The findings ultimately suggest that position filling constitutes the most critical arena in which the integrity of meritocratic reform is tested. The existence of talent management systems alone is insufficient to guarantee objective bureaucratic outcomes when informal actors retain substantial discretionary power over final decisions. Meritocracy therefore becomes contingent not only upon technical systems and procedural compliance, but also upon the ability of institutions to limit the dominance of informal networks, political intervention, and relational authority within bureaucratic governance.

The implications of this condition are significant for bureaucratic reform. The success of merit-based systems cannot be measured solely by the existence of regulations or technical instruments, but must be assessed through their consistent application in critical decision points. Leadership commitment and institutional integrity play a crucial role in safeguarding meritocratic processes from undue influence. Strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing transparency in decision-making, and standardizing assessment procedures are essential to minimize subjectivity.

Recognition of position filling as a critical testing ground for meritocracy provides strategic insight for policy improvement (Sunam et al., 2022). Efforts to enhance bureaucratic reform should prioritize this stage by ensuring that talent management systems are not only technically robust but also institutionally enforced. Meritocracy can thus evolve from a procedural requirement into a substantive practice that genuinely supports fairness, professionalism, and organizational performance.

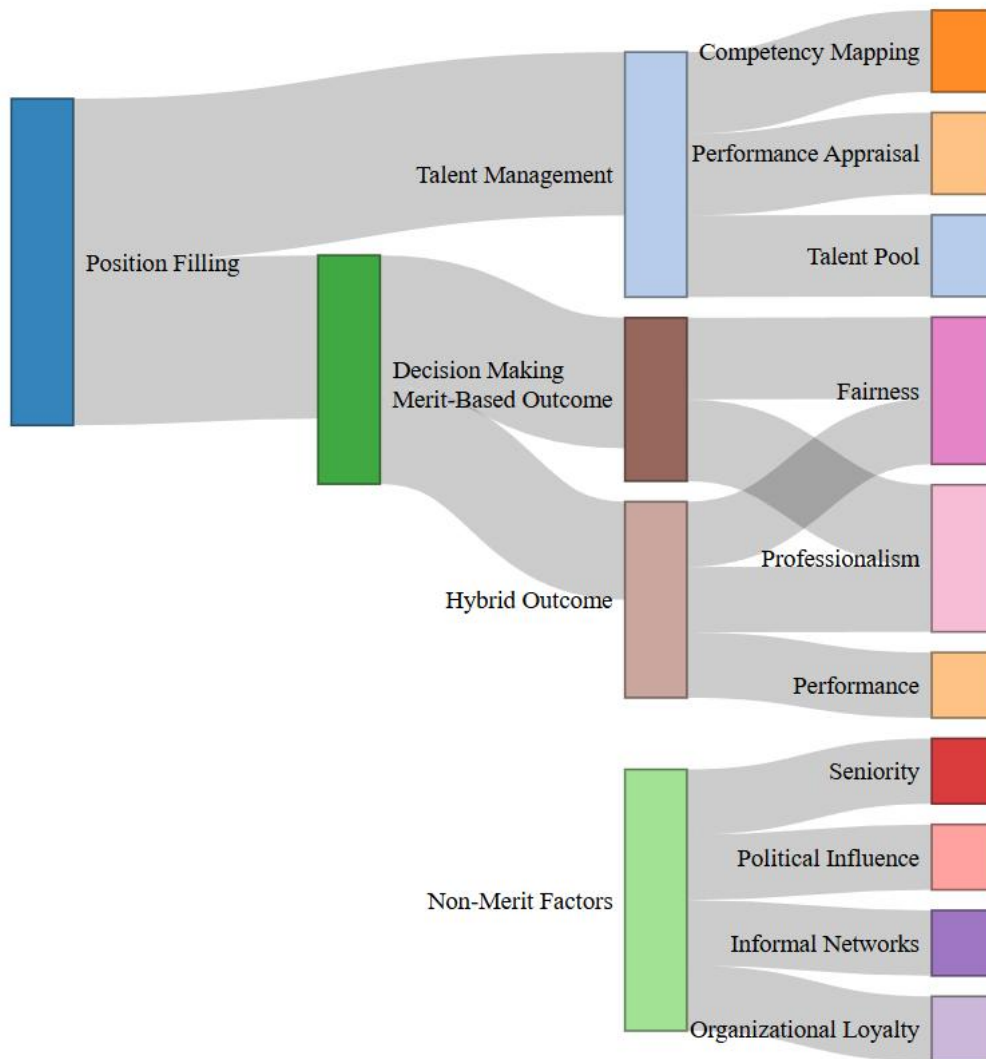


Figure 3 Sankey Diagram of Position Filling as a Critical Locus of Meritocracy Testing

Source Data Processes by the Author 2026

The figure 3 represents the decision-making flow in bureaucratic position filling as a critical locus for testing meritocracy, visualized through a process-oriented flow approach. The visualization positions position filling as the starting point and central dynamic, which then branches into two main pathways: the merit-based pathway (merit pathway) and the non-merit pathway (non-merit pathway). This structure conceptually demonstrates that the process of position filling is not merely linear and technocratic, but rather the result of complex interactions between formal systems and social practices within bureaucracy.

Within the merit-based pathway, the flow begins with the integration of talent management instruments such as competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pool (Mahdzir & Tasyrif Ghazali, 2025). These components represent the technocratic foundation of the merit system designed to ensure alignment between individual competencies, performance, and potential with organizational needs. In this context, talent management functions as an operational mechanism that connects the normative framework of meritocracy with actual decision-making practices. The flow then leads to the decision-making stage, which ideally produces merit-based outcomes, reflecting principles of fairness, objectivity, and professionalism.

The figure also illustrates the presence of a non-merit pathway that reflects empirical realities within bureaucracy. This pathway consists of factors such as seniority, political influence, informal networks, and organizational loyalty. These factors may not always be formally recognized, yet they exert significant influence on decision-making processes. The presence of the non-merit pathway indicates that bureaucratic practices are not entirely insulated from social dynamics and power relations. Position filling therefore becomes an arena in which meritocratic values interact, negotiate, and in some cases compete with non-merit interests. Both pathways converge at the decision-making stage, which serves as the primary site of contestation between merit-based and non-merit considerations. The outcomes of this process are visualized in two possible forms: merit-based outcomes and hybrid outcomes (Bond et al., 2022). Merit-based outcomes represent the ideal condition in which decisions are fully grounded in meritocratic principles, whereas hybrid outcomes reflect a more realistic condition in which decisions result from a compromise between merit and non-merit considerations. The notion of hybridity is essential, as it highlights that the implementation of meritocracy in local bureaucracy is contextual and influenced by various external factors.

The figure further illustrates the implications of these outcomes for the quality of governance, reflected in three key dimensions: fairness, professionalism, and performance. Fairness relates to perceptions of justice in the position-filling process, professionalism reflects the alignment between competencies and positions, and performance refers to the impact of decisions on overall organizational effectiveness. This flow indicates that the quality of final outcomes is largely determined by the dominance of either pathway in the decision-making process (Maskrey et al., 2022).

The visualization emphasizes that position filling constitutes a critical point for testing the consistency of meritocracy implementation. The existence of talent management systems and formal regulations does not automatically guarantee

merit-based decisions. The effectiveness of meritocracy depends on how these systems are implemented and the extent to which bureaucratic actors maintain the integrity of the process against non-merit influences. The figure functions not only as a descriptive representation but also as an analytical framework for understanding the complex relationships among systems, actors, and context in bureaucratic practice. The visualization reinforces the argument that meritocracy in position filling should be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process. Efforts to strengthen meritocracy should not rely solely on the refinement of technical instruments, but must also involve strengthening institutional capacity, organizational culture, and leadership commitment. Without synergy among these dimensions, meritocracy risks remaining procedural rather than substantive, thereby limiting its contribution to meaningful bureaucratic reform.

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of meritocracy through talent management in bureaucratic position filling reflects a complex and hybrid reality rather than a purely technocratic process. Formal mechanisms such as competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pooling indicate progress toward a systematic merit-based approach (Maskrey et al., 2022). However, their application remains inconsistent, suggesting a gap between procedural meritocracy defined by the existence of formal systems and substantive meritocracy, which is reflected in actual decision outcomes. This indicates that the effectiveness of merit-based systems is not solely determined by their design, but by how they are practiced within organizational contexts.

The findings suggest that the persistence of meritocracy failure within bureaucratic position filling is not merely the result of technical inconsistency or limited administrative capacity, but reflects deeper structural problems embedded within local governance systems. Meritocratic mechanisms formally exist and are institutionally recognized; however, their implementation remains vulnerable to discretionary intervention by bureaucratic elites who possess significant authority over final appointment decisions. This indicates that meritocracy in practice operates within unequal power relations where formal procedures can be selectively interpreted, adjusted, or overridden according to institutional and political interests. Consequently, bureaucratic reform tends to produce procedural compliance without fundamentally transforming the underlying dynamics of bureaucratic control and elite influence.

The study further reveals that non-merit factors, including seniority, informal networks, organizational loyalty, and political considerations, continue to influence decision-making processes. These factors are embedded within the socio-political structure of bureaucracy and interact with formal merit-based mechanisms, resulting in a hybrid form of meritocracy. Position filling emerges as a critical locus where this interaction becomes most visible, as it represents the stage at which competing considerations are negotiated and translated into concrete decisions. This finding shifts the analytical focus from formal policy frameworks to the practical dynamics of implementation (Maskrey et al., 2022). The implications of these findings highlight the importance of strengthening institutional and organizational dimensions to support meritocratic practices. Leadership commitment plays a central role in ensuring the consistent application of merit principles within bureaucratic systems, particularly in the context of position filling. Commitment from top-level leaders is not merely symbolic but functions as a decisive factor in shaping organizational behavior, influencing how

rules are interpreted, and determining whether merit-based standards are upheld or compromised. When leaders demonstrate a strong adherence to meritocratic values, they create a normative environment that prioritizes competence, performance, and fairness over subjective or informal considerations. This commitment also serves as a signaling mechanism across organizational levels, reinforcing expectations that decisions related to recruitment, promotion, and placement must align with established merit criteria. In contrast, weak or inconsistent leadership commitment tends to open space for discretionary practices that may deviate from meritocratic principles, thereby undermining the credibility of the system.

Transparency and standardized procedures further complement leadership commitment by providing structural safeguards against subjectivity in decision-making processes. Transparent mechanisms, such as clearly defined criteria, documented evaluation processes, and accessible information regarding selection outcomes, enhance accountability and reduce opportunities for manipulation. Standardization, on the other hand, ensures that procedures are applied uniformly across cases, minimizing variability that may arise from individual interpretation or bias. Together, transparency and standardization function as institutional instruments that constrain discretionary power and reinforce the objectivity of talent management systems. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends largely on their consistent enforcement and the willingness of organizational actors to adhere to them in practice.

Empirical findings demonstrate that leadership influence extends beyond symbolic commitment to meritocratic reform and directly shapes appointment outcomes in strategic positions. Several informants indicated that senior bureaucratic elites and top-level decision makers retained substantial discretionary authority during the final stages of position filling, particularly when candidates were perceived as politically compatible, organizationally loyal, or capable of maintaining administrative stability. In some cases, formal competency assessment results were not the sole basis for selection, as leadership preferences and relational trust became decisive considerations. This reveals that bureaucratic elites function not only as policy implementers but also as gatekeepers who determine the extent to which meritocratic procedures are substantively applied or strategically negotiated.

Beyond structural and procedural dimensions, the development of a merit-oriented organizational culture is equally critical in sustaining meritocratic practices. Organizational culture encompasses shared values, norms, and beliefs that guide behavior within institutions. In many bureaucratic contexts, informal norms such as seniority, loyalty, and relational proximity continue to shape decision-making processes, often operating alongside or even in tension with formal merit-based systems. Building a culture that internalizes meritocratic values requires a gradual process of institutional learning, reinforcement, and behavioral alignment. This involves not only formal training and capacity-building initiatives but also the cultivation of ethical standards and professional norms that emphasize fairness and competence. Over time, such cultural transformation can reduce the influence of non-merit considerations by aligning informal practices with formal institutional goals.

The study also highlights the importance of strengthening institutional capacity to support the effective implementation of talent management. Institutional capacity refers to the ability of an organization to design, implement, and sustain policies and systems in a consistent and effective manner (Holst,

2023). In the context of merit-based position filling, this includes the availability of reliable data systems that can accurately capture information on employee competencies, performance records, and career trajectories. Robust data systems enable evidence-based decision-making, reducing reliance on subjective judgment and enhancing the credibility of selection processes. In addition, the presence of skilled human resources, particularly those responsible for managing talent management systems, is essential to ensure that technical tools are applied correctly and consistently.

Integrated administrative processes further contribute to institutional capacity by facilitating coordination across different units and levels of the organization. Fragmented systems and lack of coordination often lead to inconsistencies in implementation, weakening the overall effectiveness of merit-based mechanisms. Integration ensures that various components of talent management such as assessment, evaluation, and placement operate within a coherent framework, thereby enhancing efficiency and reducing procedural gaps. This alignment is particularly important in complex bureaucratic environments where multiple actors and institutions are involved in decision-making processes. Meritocracy, therefore, should be understood as a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a fixed institutional arrangement. Its effectiveness is shaped by the continuous interaction between formal systems, organizational culture, and actor behavior. Technical refinement of tools and procedures is necessary but insufficient in isolation. Sustained efforts are required to reinforce institutional norms, strengthen leadership commitment, and build organizational capacities that support consistent implementation. In this sense, meritocracy evolves through practice, adapting to contextual challenges while striving to maintain its core principles.

Achieving fairness, professionalism, and improved organizational performance ultimately depends on the extent to which these various dimensions are aligned and mutually reinforcing. Fairness emerges when decisions are perceived as objective and just, professionalism is strengthened when positions are filled based on competence and performance, and organizational performance improves when the right individuals are placed in the right roles. The findings suggest that advancing meritocracy requires a holistic approach that integrates technical, institutional, and cultural strategies. Without such integration, merit-based systems risk remaining procedural in nature, with limited impact on the substantive quality of governance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of talent management in filling supervisory and administrative positions within the Government of Balikpapan City reflects a hybrid form of bureaucratic meritocracy in which formal merit-based mechanisms coexist with informal political and organizational influences. Although competency mapping, performance appraisal, and talent pools have been institutionally implemented, decision-making processes remain influenced by leadership discretion, organizational loyalty, and relational considerations, particularly in strategic position filling. The findings indicate that position filling represents a critical locus for testing the integrity of bureaucratic reform, as non-merit actors continue to shape appointment outcomes despite the existence of formal assessment systems. This condition demonstrates that hybrid meritocracy is not merely a transitional administrative phenomenon, but a structural governance problem reflecting the persistence of bureaucratic dominance and

informal power relations within local governance. Accordingly, strengthening meritocracy requires not only technical improvements in talent management systems but also stronger institutional accountability, reduced elite intervention, and the reinforcement of professional and transparent bureaucratic governance..

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