

Meritocracy in Public Talent Systems and Leadership Continuity: Testing the Mediating Mechanism of Organizational Justice

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how merit-based talent management influences leadership continuity in public sectors, mediated by organizational justice, among civil servants (ASN) in Tasikmalaya City Government, Indonesia. Using narrative inquiry, data from semi-structured interviews with four informant groups (promoted/non-promoted ASN, talent managers, senior leaders) and policy documents underwent thematic analysis via open, axial, and selective coding. Findings indicate formal merit mechanisms (talent mapping, 9-box matrix, talent pool, succession planning) are partially implemented, undermined by non-merit factors (personal ties, politics), yielding pseudo-meritocracy. Weak procedural justice due to transparency deficits—erodes trust, heightens leadership mismatches, disrupts continuity, and fosters demotivation/cynicism. We propose an integrative model linking meritocracy, justice, and continuity, advancing public sector governance literature.

Keywords: meritocratic system, organizational justice, continuity of leadership, narrative inquiry, local government.

INTRODUCTION

Merit-based public sector human resource management is one of the main pillars of bureaucratic reform because it is expected to be able to improve professionalism, fairness, and organizational performance. In the context of talent management, the principle of merit becomes very important because the process of promotion, mutation, and succession of positions not only determines an individual's career path, but also affects the continuity of leadership and the stability of public organizations in the long term. Normatively, a well-designed merit system should ensure that strategic positions are filled by individuals who have the competence, integrity, and potential that best suit the needs of the organization.

Nevertheless, the existence of a formal system does not always guarantee that the merit principle is consistently implemented in practice. Public organizations can adopt formal structures and instruments to meet regulatory demands and gain institutional legitimacy, but actual decisions are still influenced by informal relations and non-merit interests. In such a situation, the merit system has the potential to become a mere instrument of administrative compliance without really being a substantive basis for personnel decision-making.

This research departs from the argument that organizational fairness is a key mechanism that bridges the relationship between the implementation of the merit system and leadership continuity. A good system design will not be effective if employees do not perceive it as a fair system. When the procedures are not transparent, the criteria are not clear, and the results of the selection are not communicated openly, the legitimacy of the system will be weakened. Under these conditions, the succession system risks failing to produce a competent, trusted, and sustainable leadership transition.

The research was conducted on the Tasikmalaya City Government, which has implemented several talent management instruments such as talent mapping, talent pool, and succession planning. This context is important because it represents the transition phase of the implementation of the merit system at the local government level. Thus, this article aims to answer the question: how does the implementation of the merit system affect the perception of organizational fairness and leadership continuity in public sector talent management? The answer to this question is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to strengthening merit-based bureaucratic reform.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

Meritocracy in the Public Sector

Meritocracy, in its general sense, refers to a system of social or organizational stratification in which individuals are selected, rewarded, and advanced based on their abilities, qualifications, and performance rather than on ascriptive characteristics such as social background, personal connections, or political affiliation. The concept was popularized by Michael Young (1958), who critically described meritocracy as a system that legitimizes inequality through achievement-based selection. In contemporary organizational and management literature, meritocracy is widely associated with fairness, efficiency, and the optimal allocation of talent, as it emphasizes competence and performance as key determinants of career advancement (Sandel, 2020; Castilla & Benard, 2010).

In organizational contexts, meritocratic systems are expected to enhance performance by aligning individual capabilities with organizational roles, thereby improving decision-making quality and productivity. However, scholars also highlight that meritocracy is not purely objective in practice, as organizational processes may still be influenced by implicit biases, power relations, and institutional constraints (Castilla, 2015). Thus, meritocracy should be understood not only as a formal system but also as a socially constructed practice shaped by organizational culture and governance structures.

In the public sector, meritocracy takes on a more specific and institutionalized meaning. It refers to a system of human resource management in which recruitment, appointment, promotion, rotation, and career development are based on qualifications, competencies, and performance, supported by transparent procedures and standardized criteria. According to OECD (2017), a merit-based civil service system is a fundamental pillar of good governance, as it ensures professionalism, neutrality, and accountability in public administration. Similarly, the World Bank emphasizes that meritocratic public institutions are essential for improving government effectiveness and reducing corruption (World Bank, 2020).

The merit system in public administration has long been viewed as a mechanism to counter patronage, political interference, and favoritism (Peters & Pierre, 2004). By institutionalizing objective criteria and competitive processes, meritocracy aims to build a professional bureaucracy capable of delivering high-quality public services. In the Indonesian context, the implementation of meritocracy has been strengthened through bureaucratic reform agendas, particularly following the enactment of civil service regulations that emphasize professionalism, neutrality, and performance-based management.

However, the effectiveness of meritocracy in the public sector is not solely determined by the existence of formal rules and systems. Its success depends on the organization's capacity to ensure procedural consistency, equal access to opportunities, and protection from non-merit pressures. As noted by Rasul and Rogger (2018), institutional reforms in public organizations often face implementation gaps due to political dynamics, administrative capacity constraints, and organizational culture. Consequently, meritocracy in practice may diverge from its formal design, leading to inconsistencies between policy and implementation.

This perspective highlights that meritocracy in the public sector should be understood as both a formal governance system and a lived organizational practice. Its effectiveness ultimately depends on how well principles of fairness, transparency, and accountability are embedded in everyday decision-making processes.

Organizational Fairness

Organizational fairness, commonly referred to as organizational justice, provides a critical analytical lens for assessing how employees evaluate the legitimacy and effectiveness of human resource practices, including merit-based systems. Rooted in social exchange theory and equity theory, organizational justice explains how individuals form judgments about fairness and how these judgments influence their attitudes and behaviors within organizations (Greenberg, 1987; Adams, 1965).

A widely accepted framework of organizational justice is proposed by Jason A. Colquitt (2001), who conceptualizes fairness into four distinct but interrelated dimensions: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. Distributive justice refers to the perceived fairness of outcomes, particularly whether decisions such as promotions are aligned with an individual's contributions, performance, and qualifications. This dimension is closely linked to equity theory, which suggests that individuals compare their inputs and outcomes with those of others to evaluate fairness.

Procedural justice, on the other hand, focuses on the fairness of the processes used to arrive at decisions. It emphasizes consistency, impartiality, accuracy of information, and the presence of mechanisms for voice and appeal (Leventhal, 1980). In the context of merit-based systems, procedural justice is particularly crucial, as transparent and standardized procedures are expected to ensure that decisions are based on objective criteria rather than subjective or political considerations.

Interpersonal justice reflects the degree to which individuals are treated with dignity, respect, and politeness during the implementation of procedures, while informational justice concerns the adequacy, honesty, and clarity of explanations provided regarding decisions (Colquitt et al., 2001). These two dimensions highlight the relational and communicative aspects of fairness, which are essential in shaping employees' perceptions even when outcomes are unfavorable.

In bureaucratic and public sector contexts, organizational fairness plays a pivotal role in shaping employee responses to human resource decisions. Empirical studies show that perceptions of fairness significantly influence job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in leadership, and acceptance of managerial decisions (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). When employees perceive selection and promotion processes as fair, they are more likely to support organizational policies and maintain high levels of performance, even if the outcomes are not personally favorable. Conversely, perceived injustice can lead to negative consequences such as reduced motivation, organizational cynicism, and resistance to authority (Colquitt et al., 2013). In the context of merit systems, this implies that the effectiveness of meritocracy is not solely determined by formal rules or objective indicators, but by how those systems are perceived in terms of fairness. Therefore, organizational justice serves as a crucial mediating mechanism that links merit-based practices to broader organizational outcomes, including leadership legitimacy and continuity.

Leadership Continuity

Leadership continuity refers to an organization's ability to sustain strategic direction, program implementation, and operational capacity despite changes in leadership positions. In organizational and management literature, leadership continuity is closely associated with the effectiveness of succession planning and talent management systems, which ensure that leadership transitions occur without disrupting organizational performance (Rothwell, 2010; Kesner & Sebra, 1994).

In the context of public sector organizations, particularly local government, leadership continuity carries additional complexity. Leadership changes do not merely involve the replacement

of individuals, but also influence organizational routines, policy priorities, institutional memory, and coordination networks. As noted by James L. Perry and colleagues in public administration literature, leadership stability is essential for maintaining policy consistency and ensuring effective public service delivery. Frequent or poorly managed leadership transitions can lead to fragmentation of programs, loss of organizational knowledge, and reduced administrative effectiveness (Perry & Rainey, 1988).

Succession planning plays a critical role in maintaining leadership continuity. According to Rothwell (2010), effective succession planning involves systematically identifying, developing, and preparing potential leaders to ensure that organizations are not vulnerable to leadership gaps. In merit-based systems, succession planning is expected to align leadership appointments with competencies, performance, and organizational needs, thereby enhancing both continuity and adaptability.

However, when promotions and rotations are not linked to structured talent management systems, leadership transitions may result in discontinuity. Empirical studies in public administration highlight that politically influenced or non-merit-based appointments often lead to leadership mismatches, reduced strategic coherence, and weakened organizational performance (Peters & Pierre, 2004). Such conditions can disrupt established work processes, alter program priorities without adequate evaluation, and undermine coordination across organizational units.

Conversely, leadership transitions that are competency-based and supported by structured succession mechanisms can strengthen organizational resilience. Well-prepared leaders are more capable of maintaining continuity while simultaneously introducing innovation and adaptation to changing environments. This aligns with the concept of *adaptive continuity*, where organizations sustain their core functions while evolving strategically (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Building on this theoretical foundation, this study proposes that leadership continuity in the public sector is not solely determined by the existence of formal succession systems, but also by how those systems are implemented and perceived. Specifically, the quality of merit system implementation influences civil servants' perceptions of organizational justice, which in turn shapes the legitimacy of leadership and the sustainability of organizational processes.

Thus, the challenge of meritocracy in local government extends beyond policy compliance. It is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of civil servants and the perceived fairness of organizational practices. These perceptions ultimately determine whether leadership transitions are accepted as legitimate and whether organizational continuity can be effectively maintained. Building on the preceding literature, this study positions meritocracy, organizational justice, and leadership continuity within an integrated analytical framework. While prior studies have largely treated merit-based systems as formal mechanisms to enhance bureaucratic professionalism and performance, this research argues that their effectiveness is contingent upon how they are experienced and interpreted by organizational members. In particular, organizational justice emerges as a critical mediating mechanism that links the formal design of merit systems to their practical outcomes. When merit-based processes are perceived as fair, transparent, and consistent, they strengthen the legitimacy of leadership and support continuity in organizational direction and performance. Conversely, when gaps between policy and practice persist, perceptions of injustice may undermine trust, weaken acceptance of leadership decisions, and disrupt continuity. Therefore, this study advances the proposition that the success of meritocracy in local government is not solely determined by regulatory compliance, but by the extent to which fairness is embedded in its implementation and recognized by civil servants as a credible basis for leadership selection and organizational sustainability.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry strategy to understand the subjective experience of state civil servants (ASN) in the implementation of the merit system, the perception of organizational justice, and its impact on leadership continuity. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meaning, interpretation, and social dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative approaches. Narrative inquiry focuses on the analysis of informants' stories and life experiences, making it relevant to uncover the gap between formal policy and actual practice in public bureaucracy.

Research Location and Context

The research was conducted within the Tasikmalaya City Government which has implemented a merit system in ASN talent management through mechanisms such as talent mapping, talent pool, and succession planning. This context was chosen because it represents the transition phase of the implementation of the merit system at the local government level, thus allowing an analysis of the dynamics between policy design and practice in the field.

Informant and Sampling Techniques

Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques by considering their direct involvement in the talent management process and position promotion. To obtain a comprehensive perspective, informants are divided into four main groups, namely: (1) ASN who are promoted through the merit system, (2) officials who have not been promoted or have not been promoted, (3) selection team/BKPSDM/talent system manager, and (4) senior ASN who have undergone a leadership transition which consists of 8 informants with masintg-each group consists of 2 informants with a span of about 20 minutes in the interview. This strategy allows for the triangulation of perspectives between policy actors, policy recipients, and internal observers of the organization

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with semi-structured guidelines compiled based on three main research focuses, namely the implementation of meritocracy, perceptions of organizational fairness, and leadership continuity. Interviews are conducted directly with a duration adjusted to the depth of information obtained. The entire interview process is documented and transcribed for analysis purposes. In addition, the researcher also used policy and regulatory documents related to the merit system as supporting data to strengthen the context of the analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is carried out in stages with a thematic analysis approach that is integrated with qualitative coding. The first stage is open coding to identify the units of meaning from the interview data and form initial codes such as meritocracy, organizational justice, leadership continuity, and policy-practice gap. The second stage is axial coding to connect related codes into larger categories, such as the quality of merit system implementation, the perception of organizational fairness, non-merit distortion factors, and the impact on leadership. The third stage is selective coding to identify the core theme, namely pseudo-meritocracy and the mediating role of organizational justice. The analysis process is carried out iteratively by comparing data between informants to find patterns, contradictions, and dominant themes.

Data Validity

To ensure trustworthiness, this study uses several strategies, namely triangulation of sources by comparing the perspectives of various groups of informants, member checking if possible, thick descriptions through the presentation of in-depth contextual descriptions, and trail audits in the form of systematic documentation of the analysis process. This strategy is aimed at strengthening the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of research findings.

The research upholds the ethical principles of research by maintaining the confidentiality of the identity of the informant, using initials or anonymous identities in data reporting, and ensuring that all participation is voluntary and without pressure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Open Coding Result

The initial stage of qualitative data analysis involved open coding to identify meaningful units from interview transcripts. The coding process generated several categories reflecting key dimensions of merit system implementation, organizational justice, leadership continuity, and their associated impacts.

Meritocracy (MER)

Table 1 Reflecting key dimensions of merit system implementation

Code	Label	Description
MER1	Process Transparency	Clarity and accessibility of information regarding promotion and selection processes
MER2	Objective Assessment	Use of performance, competence, and measurable indicators in evaluation
MER3	Competency Fit	Alignment between job requirements and individual qualifications
MER4	Implementation Consistency	Consistency in applying merit principles across cases
MER5	Talent Pool System	Use of talent mapping, 9-box matrix, and succession planning
MER6	Non-Merit Intervention	Influence of political, personal, or relational factors
MER7	Equal Opportunity	Fair access to promotion opportunities for all civil servants
MER8	Evaluation Mechanism	Availability of monitoring, feedback, and system evaluation

Organizational Justice (OJ)

Table 2 Reflecting key Indicators of Procedural Justice

Code	Label	Description
OJP1	Procedural Fairness	Perception of fairness in selection processes
OJP2	Process Consistency	Equal application of procedures across candidates
OJP3	Decision Transparency	Clarity of criteria, process, and outcomes
OJP4	Appeal Mechanism	Availability of complaint or feedback mechanisms

Distributive Justice

Table 3 Reflecting key Indicators of Distributive Justice

Code	Label	Description
OJD1	Outcome Fairness	Alignment of promotion results with performance and qualifications
OJD2	Outcome Satisfaction	Level of satisfaction with promotion outcomes
OJD3	Perceived Inequality	Perception of unfair distribution of positions

Interactional Justice

Table 4 Reflecting key Indicators of Interactional Justice

Code	Label	Description
OJI1	Respectful Treatment	Degree of dignity and fairness in interpersonal treatment
OJI2	Open Communication	Transparency and openness in communication
OJI3	Clarity of Explanation	Adequacy of explanations provided for decisions

Leadership Continuity (LC)

Table 5 Reflecting key dimensions of Leadership Continuity

Code	Label	Description
LC1	Leadership Stability	Consistency in leadership direction and roles
LC2	Leadership Transition	Process of leadership change
LC3	Program Continuity	Continuation of policies and programs
LC4	Leader Adaptability	Ability of new leaders to adjust effectively
LC5	Organizational Disruption	Disturbance caused by leadership change
LC6	Succession Planning	Structured preparation of future leaders
LC7	Trust in Leadership	Level of trust in appointed leaders

Policy–Practice Gap (GPP)

Table 6 Reflecting key dimensions of Policy–Practice Gap

Code	Label	Description
GPP1	Policy–Practice Gap	Discrepancy between formal rules and actual implementation
GPP2	Symbolic Implementation	Systems exist but are not fully applied
GPP3	Organizational Culture	Informal norms influencing decision-making
GPP4	Political Pressure	External or internal political influence
GPP5	Regulatory Ambiguity	Different interpretations of policies

Individual and Organizational Impact (IMP)

Table 7 Reflecting key dimensions of Individual and Organizational Impact

Code	Label	Description
IMP1	Work Motivation	Changes in employee motivation
IMP2	Job Satisfaction	Level of satisfaction with organizational practices
IMP3	Organizational Performance	Impact on team and institutional performance
IMP4	Organizational Commitment	Employee loyalty and engagement
IMP5	Organizational Cynicism	Distrust toward the system and leadership

Synthesis of Open Coding

The open coding results indicate that while meritocratic structures are formally established, their implementation is challenged by inconsistencies, limited transparency, and the persistence of non-merit influences. These conditions are closely linked to varying perceptions of organizational justice, which subsequently shape leadership continuity and broader organizational outcomes.

Axial Coding

The axial coding stage aimed to identify relationships among the initial codes and to organize them into higher-level categories that explain patterns in the data. This process revealed several interconnected dimensions that link merit system implementation, organizational justice, leadership continuity, and organizational outcomes.

1. Meritocracy Quality

This category reflects the extent to which the merit system is implemented as intended.

Related Codes:

MER1, MER2, MER3, MER4, MER5, MER7

Description:

Meritocracy quality is characterized by transparent processes, objective assessment criteria, alignment between competencies and positions, and the structured use of talent management tools such as talent pools and succession planning.

However, the findings indicate that while these elements exist formally, their implementation is often inconsistent, leading to variations in how merit principles are applied across cases.

2. Distortion Factors (Non-Merit Influence)

This category captures the factors that undermine the integrity of the merit system.

Related Codes:

MER6, GPP3, GPP4

Description:

Distortion factors include political intervention, personal relationships, organizational culture, and informal networks that influence decision-making processes. These factors contribute to deviations from merit-based principles and weaken the credibility of the system.

3. Policy–Practice Decoupling

This category explains the gap between formal regulations and actual implementation.

Related Codes:

GPP1, GPP2, GPP5

Description:

Although merit-based policies are formally established, their implementation often remains symbolic. The system exists at a regulatory level but is not consistently applied in practice. This decoupling reflects institutional constraints, ambiguity in interpretation, and uneven readiness across organizational units.

4. Organizational Justice Perception

This category represents how civil servants evaluate fairness within the system.

Related Codes:

OJP1–OJP4, OJD1–OJD3, OJI1–OJI3

Description:

Organizational justice emerges as a central interpretive lens through which employees assess the merit system.

- a. Procedural justice is influenced by transparency and consistency
- b. Distributive justice relates to fairness of outcomes
- c. Interactional justice reflects interpersonal treatment and communication

Low transparency and perceived inequality contribute to negative fairness perceptions.

5. Leadership Sustainability vs Disruption

This category captures the dual outcomes of leadership transitions.

a. Leadership Sustainability

Related Codes:

LC1, LC3, LC6

Description:

When merit principles are applied effectively, leadership continuity is supported through structured succession planning, stable program implementation, and aligned competencies.

b. Leadership Disruption

Related Codes:

LC2, LC5

Description:

When merit principles are compromised, leadership transitions lead to disruption, including misalignment of competencies, changes in direction, and decreased effectiveness.

6. Organizational Impact

This category reflects the consequences of the system on individuals and the organization.

Related Codes:

IMP1–IMP5

Description:

Perceived injustice and inconsistencies in the merit system result in:

- a. decreased motivation
- b. reduced job satisfaction
- c. organizational cynicism
- d. weakened commitment
- e. declining organizational performance

Selective Coding

Core Category: Pseudo-Meritocracy and the Mediating Role of Organizational Justice in Leadership Continuity

This core category captures the central finding that, although meritocratic systems are formally established, their practical implementation remains inconsistent. As a result, organizational justice becomes the key mechanism through which merit systems influence leadership continuity and organizational outcomes.

1. Meritocracy as Formal Compliance

Description:

Merit-based systems are formally institutionalized through structured mechanisms such as talent mapping, talent pools, and succession planning. However, these systems are not consistently applied in practice and often function as administrative compliance rather than substantive decision-making tools.

Key Insight:

Meritocracy exists in form, but not fully in practice.

2. Distorted Merit through Non-Merit Influence

Description:

The implementation of merit systems is frequently influenced by non-merit factors such as political interests, personal relationships, and organizational culture. These distortions undermine the objectivity of decision-making processes.

Key Insight:

Non-merit factors weaken the integrity of the merit system.

3. Justice Deficit in Talent Management

Description:

A significant gap in organizational justice particularly procedural justice emerges due to limited transparency, unclear criteria, and restricted access to information. Distributive and interactional justice are also affected by perceived inequality and differential treatment.

Key Insight:

Merit systems fail when they are not perceived as fair.

4. Fragile Leadership Continuity

Description:

Leadership continuity is not consistently achieved. While formal systems aim to ensure stable succession, weak merit implementation leads to leadership mismatches, disrupted workflows, and inconsistent policy directions.

Key Insight:

Leadership continuity depends on the credibility of the merit system.

5. Organizational Cynicism and Performance Risk

Description:

Perceived injustice leads to declining motivation, reduced trust, and the emergence of organizational cynicism. These conditions negatively affect individual performance and overall organizational effectiveness.

Key Insight:

Unfair systems produce disengaged and distrustful employees.

The results of the study show that the Tasikmalaya City Government has formally adopted a merit system in ASN talent management through various structured instruments, such as talent mapping based on a 9-box matrix, talent pool development, and the preparation of succession planning. This process is supported by relatively comprehensive assessment indicators, covering performance aspects through e-Performance, awards, and 360-degree assessments, as well as potential aspects that include competence, qualifications, integrity, and morality. Integration with the national system also shows efforts to strengthen objectivity and accountability in the management of public sector human resources.

The findings of the study show that the merit system in ASN talent management has been formally institutionalized through instruments such as talent mapping, 9-box matrix, talent pool, and succession planning. However, the existence of such instruments does not automatically guarantee that the principle of meritocracy is implemented substantively. This phenomenon leads to a condition of pseudo-meritocracy, i.e. a situation in which meritocracy is present administratively, but is still vulnerable to non-merit intervention in decision-making practices. Thus,

bureaucratic reform does not stop at the preparation of the system, but requires the internalization of the culture of merit in daily organizational practices.

Perception of Organizational Justice in the Meritocratic System

The findings of the study show that the perception of organizational fairness is a central issue in the implementation of the merit system. Of the three dimensions of organizational justice, namely procedural justice, distributive justice, and interactional justice, the procedural justice dimension emerges as the weakest aspect. Most of the informants revealed that the selection and promotion process of positions has not been fully transparent, especially regarding the clarity of criteria, selection stages, and assessment results. ASN does not have adequate access to information on their position in the talent management system, so they do not know career opportunities or aspects that need to be improved.

In the distributive justice dimension, it was found that there was a discrepancy between the results of promotion and the competence, education, and work experience of civil servants. Several informants highlighted the phenomenon of step ups and the placement of officials who are not linear with the background of their expertise. Meanwhile, in the interactional justice dimension, there are indications of unequal treatment between individuals or groups, for example due to personal closeness, similarity of alma mater, or certain informal relationships. Overall, the low perception of organizational fairness undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of the merit system.

Impact on Leadership Continuity

In the context of leadership, the results of the study show that the talent management system is conceptually designed to support leadership continuity through talent pool and succession planning. Ideally, this system allows organizations to have a backup of leaders that have been mapped and prepared in advance so that the process of filling positions is not carried out ad hoc. However, in practice, the effectiveness of the system still faces various challenges.

Some informants revealed that the placement of officials who are not entirely competency-based can cause disruptions in the leadership process, such as a lack of understanding of the main tasks and functions, policy changes that are not based on evaluation, and decreased decision-making effectiveness. Continuity of leadership also tends to be partial: formal programs that are based on regulations usually remain in place, but innovative programs and certain strategic policies are often unsustainable due to changes in leadership preferences.

Impact on Individuals and Organizational Performance

The low perception of justice in the implementation of the merit system has a significant impact on the attitudes and behaviors of civil servants. Several informants revealed a decrease in work motivation due to uncertainty in the career development system, as well as a decrease in trust in the existing promotion mechanism. This condition also gives rise to a tendency of organizational cynicism, when ASN no longer fully believes that performance and competence are the main factors in promotion of positions. In the long run, the situation has the potential to lower organizational commitment and the quality of individual performance.

At the organizational level, the impacts that arise include disruption of team collaboration, decreased productivity, and increased risk of placing incompetent leaders in strategic positions. This condition has the potential to hinder the achievement of organizational goals and reduce the overall quality of public services.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the results show that there is a gap between the merit system as a formal policy and its implementation in practice. This gap affects the perception of organizational fairness, which in turn impacts the effectiveness of the organization's leadership continuity and performance. These findings confirm that the success of merit systems is not only determined by sound policy design, but is highly dependent on how they are implemented in a fair, transparent, and consistent manner.

Organizational justice as a mediation mechanism

The main contribution of this study lies in the affirmation that organizational justice is a mediating variable that determines the effectiveness of the merit system. When the selection procedure is not transparent, the criteria are unclear, and the results are not adequately accessible by ASN, then procedural justice becomes weak and the legitimacy of the system decreases. Distributive injustices manifested through mismatches between competencies and positions, as well as interactional injustices reflected in the perception of different treatments, further strengthen distrust of the system. Thus, the effectiveness of meritocracy is largely determined by the perception of fairness, not just by the mere existence of formal design.

Indirect relationship between merit systems and leadership continuity

Conceptually, the talent management system is designed to ensure continuity of leadership through a succession planning mechanism. However, this study shows that the relationship between the merit system and leadership continuity is not direct. Continuity of leadership can only be realized if the merit system is implemented fairly and trusted by the organization's actors. When justice is perceived as low, strategic positions risk being filled by individuals who are not in accordance with the demands of competence, thus causing disturbances in leadership quality and organizational direction.

Psychological and organizational impact

Low perception of justice has significant psychological and organizational consequences. At the individual level, civil servants can experience a decrease in work motivation because they feel that performance and competence do not always correlate with career opportunities. At the collective level, this condition develops into organizational cynicism, decreased trust, weakened collaboration, and decreased productivity. In the long run, such a situation can create a bureaucracy with a low level of trust that ultimately hinders the effectiveness of the organization and the quality of public services.

Theoretical contributions

This research makes a theoretical contribution by developing an integrative model that connects meritocracy, organizational justice, and leadership continuity within a single analytical framework. Different from the view that sees the merit system as a direct determinant of organizational outcomes, this study shows that the relationship is indirect and mediated by the perception of organizational fairness. The concept of pseudo-meritocracy also offers a conceptual lens to explain why a formally developed public talent system can still fail to produce a succession of competent and trusted leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the existence of a merit system in public sector talent management does not automatically guarantee the creation of leadership continuity. Although formally the system has been well designed and structured, its implementation still faces significant gaps due to the influence of non-merit factors and limited transparency. The main findings of this study confirm that organizational fairness is a key mediation mechanism that determines the effectiveness of the merit system. When the promotion and placement process is not perceived as fair, then the merit system loses legitimacy and becomes less effective in producing competent and sustainable leadership.

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations can be proposed. First, local governments need to strengthen the transparency of the talent system by opening access to information related to talent pools, assessment criteria, and selection results. Second, procedural fairness needs to be institutionalized through standardization of selection stages and the provision of feedback mechanisms for candidates. Third, promotion and mutation decisions need to be depoliticized by strengthening independent oversight and minimizing non-merit interventions. Fourth, the internalization of merit culture needs to be strengthened so that the merit system does

not stop at the administrative level, but really becomes the basis for strategic decision-making. Fifth, succession planning must be consistently linked to a competency-based talent pool to ensure stable and quality leadership continuity.

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