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Bureaucratic Reform and Relational Bias in the Transfer of Civil Servants: Evidence from Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

Background Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia positions the merit system as a fundamental principle in the management of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) in order to achieve a professional, neutral, and service-oriented bureaucracy. However, its implementation at the local level continues to face substantial challenges, particularly due to political intervention and relational bias. This study aims to examine the distortion of the merit system in civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, and to identify the dominant forms of relational bias and their implications for bureaucratic performance and public service delivery.

Methods This study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study design. Six informants were purposively selected, comprising civil servants who had experienced job transfers as well as individuals with in-depth knowledge of local bureaucratic and political dynamics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing techniques supported by triangulation.

Results The findings reveal that civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency are not fully based on considerations of competence and performance, but are strongly influenced by post-election political interests, personal proximity, kinship ties, and patronage. The role of the Position and Rank Consideration Board (Baperjakat) tends to be largely administrative and has not functioned effectively as an objective decision-making mechanism. Non-merit-based transfers have adversely affected civil servant motivation, weakened professional work culture, and potentially diminished the quality of public services.

Conclusions This study concludes that the failure to implement the merit system is not merely attributable to regulatory weaknesses, but primarily to the lack of political will to uphold civil servant neutrality and professionalism. Accordingly, strengthening oversight mechanisms, enforcing strict sanctions, and transforming local political culture are essential to ensure the effective implementation of bureaucratic reform at the regional level.

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Introduction

Despite being positioned as a central pillar of governance reform in Indonesia, bureaucratic reform continues to face substantial challenges, particularly at the local government level. Since the post-Reformasi era, bureaucratic reform has been formally oriented toward the creation of a clean, accountable, and professional public administration through the consistent application of the merit system in civil service management. The merit system emphasizes objective criteria such as qualifications, competencies, and performance as the primary basis for recruitment, promotion, and transfer decisions within the State Civil Apparatus (ASN). In principle, this framework is designed to ensure neutrality, professionalism, and effectiveness in public service delivery. However, empirical realities across many regions in Indonesia indicate that the implementation of the merit system remains deeply problematic and uneven.

In practice, merit-based principles are frequently distorted by non-merit considerations, including nepotism, political loyalty, collusion, and what is commonly referred to as relational bias, that is, preferential treatment based on personal proximity, kinship ties, alumni networks, or informal political affiliations. These practices undermine the normative foundations of bureaucratic reform and weaken the credibility of public institutions. Although Indonesia has established a relatively strong legal framework to support meritocracy, most notably through Law No. 20 of 2023 on the State Civil Apparatus, the enforcement of these regulations at the subnational level remains inconsistent. Reports and investigative findings by the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia and the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) repeatedly document violations of merit principles, particularly in the processes of civil servant transfer and promotion. In many cases, appointment decisions are driven more by personal closeness to political elites or regional heads than by transparent evaluations of competence and performance.

The persistence of these practices has serious implications for bureaucratic performance and organizational morale. High-performing civil servants often experience demotivation when merit-based achievements are sidelined by informal political considerations. Over time, this condition contributes to bureaucratic stagnation, erodes professional work culture, and weakens institutional capacity to deliver effective public services. The merit system, rather than functioning as a substantive governance mechanism, risks being reduced to a symbolic or procedural formality devoid of real influence over decision-making processes.

These structural weaknesses are further exacerbated by local political dynamics, particularly in the aftermath of regional head elections. Leadership transitions following elections frequently trigger large-scale bureaucratic reshuffles and civil servant transfers. While personnel rotation is, in principle, a legitimate and necessary component of human resource management, in many local governments such processes are heavily politicized. As noted by Putra (2021), post-election bureaucratic restructuring often reflects a dual logic: on the one hand, the stated objective of organizational efficiency, and on the other, the political imperative to consolidate power and reward loyal supporters. This dualism creates structural tension between professional administrative needs and partisan political interests.

Empirical studies reinforce this observation. Fadlan et al. (2020), for example, document

systematic deviations from meritocratic principles in local civil service management, where transfers and promotions are shaped not by performance or competence, but by seniority systems and spoils practices, the allocation of bureaucratic positions as political rewards. Such practices reflect a broader pattern of bureaucratic politicization, in which public offices are treated as extensions of electoral victory rather than neutral instruments of governance. Compounding this problem is the marginalization of formal advisory institutions, such as the Position and Rank Consideration Board (Badan Pertimbangan Jabatan dan Kepangkatan/Baperjakat). Although Baperjakat is formally mandated to provide objective assessments of civil servant placement based on competence and career development considerations, its role in many regions has been reduced to administrative compliance rather than substantive decision-making.

This phenomenon aligns closely with the classic theory of bureaucratic politicization articulated by Barbara Geddes (1994). Using a rational choice framework, Geddes argues that elected leaders face three competing imperatives: political survival, the creation of a loyal political machine, and the pursuit of effective governance. In many developing democracies, including Indonesia, the imperative to secure political survival and loyalty often takes precedence over the goal of administrative effectiveness. Consequently, political leaders intervene extensively in bureaucratic appointments to ensure loyalty, even at the expense of competence and professionalism. Such interventions directly undermine the merit system and transform bureaucratic institutions into tools of political consolidation rather than mechanisms of public service delivery.

Excessive political intervention in bureaucratic management poses a serious threat to good governance. It compromises bureaucratic independence, weakens accountability, and shifts the orientation of public administration away from citizen service toward elite interests. The strategic placement of loyalists in key bureaucratic positions not only distorts meritocratic principles but also fosters a culture of dependency and compliance within the civil service. As Prabowo (2022) and Zuhro (2022) argue, politicized bureaucracies tend to prioritize loyalty over competence, resulting in declining administrative performance and reduced public trust in government institutions.

Furthermore, the politicization of bureaucracy and deviations from the merit system are common phenomena in developing countries and emerging democracies. Geddes (1994) explains that political intervention in bureaucratic placement is often used to maintain loyalty and continuity of power, even though it undermines administrative performance. Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2016) found that political patronage and personal relationships in civil service management undermine bureaucratic professionalism and neutrality. Meanwhile, Rauch and Evans (2000) and Dahlström, Lapuente and Teorell (2012) show that the implementation of a merit system is positively correlated with governance quality, while non-merit practices such as nepotism and political loyalty negatively impact bureaucratic effectiveness.

The challenges of implementing bureaucratic reform are particularly acute in local contexts such as East Nusa Tenggara Province. In this region, strong kinship ties, geographic proximity, and shared ethnic or regional identities often reinforce patronage-based political cultures. These socio-cultural factors can normalize informal networks of influence and make objective policy implementation more difficult. In such settings, relational considerations frequently become embedded in formal administrative processes, blurring

the boundary between personal loyalty and institutional responsibility.

Against this backdrop, Timor Tengah Selatan Regency presents a compelling case for examining the distortion of the merit system at the local level. The regency has been widely perceived as exhibiting unstable patterns of civil servant transfers, frequent bureaucratic reshuffles following political transitions, and allegations of non-procedural interventions in personnel placement. These dynamics pose a direct threat to the core objectives of bureaucratic reform and undermine the development of a professional working environment within local government institutions. Rather than enhancing organizational performance, frequent and politically motivated transfers disrupt institutional memory, create uncertainty among civil servants, and weaken long-term policy implementation.

Given these conditions, this study addresses an urgent need for critical and context-sensitive analysis of bureaucratic reform at the local level. Specifically, it seeks to examine the extent to which the implementation of the merit system in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency has been distorted by relational bias. The study investigates whether civil servant transfers are genuinely based on objective performance and competency criteria or whether they rely predominantly on informal "insider parameters," such as political affiliation, kinship ties, alumni networks, or personal proximity to decision-makers.

More concretely, the study aims to (1) identify the dominant forms of relational bias influencing civil servant transfers, including political loyalty, familial relations, and patronage networks; (2) analyze how these biases affect civil servant morale, motivation, and professional identity; and (3) assess the broader implications of non-merit-based transfers for the quality of public service delivery. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research seeks to move beyond formal regulatory analysis and capture the lived experiences and perceptions of civil servants operating within politicized bureaucratic environments.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute empirically and theoretically to the literature on bureaucratic reform and civil service management in decentralized governance systems. At the policy level, the study aims to generate context-specific recommendations for local governments and oversight institutions such as KASN, emphasizing the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, greater institutional independence, and cultural transformation within local political systems. Ultimately, the study underscores that without genuine political will and structural safeguards, bureaucratic reform risks remaining a procedural exercise rather than a transformative governance agenda.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Cresswell and David Cresswell, 2018). This design was selected to enable an in-depth and contextual exploration of civil servant transfer practices and the distortion of merit system implementation resulting from relational bias in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture the complex dynamics of bureaucratic politics, decision-making mechanisms, and the subjective experiences of civil servants, dimensions that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods.

The population of this study comprises all civil servants employed within the Government of Timor Tengah Selatan Regency. Given the study's focus on transfer practices and

strategic decision-making processes, not all members of the population were included as research subjects. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement, experience, and level of understanding of civil servant transfer processes and local bureaucratic–political dynamics.

The inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) civil servants who had experienced structural position transfers following regional head elections , and (2) individuals possessing in-depth knowledge of civil servant transfer processes and bureaucratic politics in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, including both civil servants and non-civil servants. The exclusion criterion applied to civil servants who had never been involved in, or did not possess relevant information regarding, the civil servant transfer process.

Based on these criteria, six (6) informants were selected. The informants consisted of three (3) civil servants who had directly experienced position transfers and three (3) key informants drawn from former civil servants, academics/public policy observers, and members of the Regional House of Representatives. All informants who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed; therefore, no informants were excluded during the final selection process.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

Informant Code	Institutional Background	Position / Role	Relevance to the Study
ASN-01	Local Government	Former Head of Section	Experienced post-election structural transfer; directly affected by non-merit-based mutation
ASN-02	Local Government	Former Head of Division	Involved in strategic bureaucratic position prior to transfer; knowledgeable about internal decision-making processes
ASN-03	Local Government	Structural Officer	Experienced transfer allegedly influenced by relational and political considerations
Key-01	Former Civil Servant	Retired Senior Bureaucrat	Possesses historical and institutional knowledge of civil service management and mutation practices
Key-02	Academic / Policy Analyst	Public Administration Scholar	Provides analytical insight into bureaucratic politicization and merit system implementation
Key-03	Regional	Member of	Offers legislative and

	Legislature (DPRD)	DPRD	political perspective on executive control over bureaucratic appointments

Source: Fieldwork data (2025)

Data were collected using three primary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with all informants using semi-structured interview guidelines to explore their experiences of job transfers, decision-making mechanisms, and the forms of relational bias involved. Second, non-participant observation was carried out within local government offices to examine interaction patterns, organizational culture, and bureaucratic practices related to civil servant transfers. Third, document analysis was conducted on official documents, including transfer decision letters, civil service regulations, and reports or recommendations issued by relevant oversight institutions.

The primary research instrument in this study was the researcher, supported by semi-structured interview guidelines and observation sheets. The interview guidelines were developed based on the research objectives and a review of relevant literature on the merit system, bureaucratic politicization, and relational bias. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, by comparing information obtained from different informants, observational findings, and documentary evidence. The collected data were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data display, and thematic conclusion drawing, allowing for systematic interpretation and ensuring the consistency and credibility of the research findings.

This study did not undergo formal ethical clearance, as it did not involve medical interventions, experimental procedures, or the collection of biological data, nor did it pose physical or psychological risks to research participants. Nevertheless, the research adhered strictly to the principles of social research ethics. All informants were provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives and potential benefits and gave their voluntary consent to participate. Informant confidentiality was maintained through the use of coded identifiers in data presentation and reporting. All data collected were used solely for academic purposes and were not disseminated beyond the scope of this research.

Results and Discussion

Politicized Civil Servant Transfers and the Subversion of Merit-Based Logic

The findings of this study demonstrate that civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency are predominantly shaped by post-electoral political considerations rather than by merit-based principles of competence, performance, and organizational needs. Across all interviewed informants, transfers were consistently interpreted as political consequences following regional head elections, rather than as instruments of professional career development or administrative efficiency.

Several civil servants explicitly linked their reassignment to their political positioning during local elections. One informant recounted being transferred from a technically relevant position to an unrelated administrative role, despite possessing adequate expertise and a stable performance record. He explained that the reassignment was widely understood within the bureaucracy as a political sanction, noting that *"he was moved from Head of Spatial Planning to Head of Community Empowerment, a position unrelated to his technical*

background, because he did not support the elected regent during the election" (ASN-01, interview, 12 March 2025). This narrative suggests that political loyalty operates as an informal yet decisive criterion in personnel decisions, effectively overriding formal performance evaluations.

A similar experience was described by another informant who previously held a strategic mid-level position within the local bureaucracy. He emphasized that the transfer occurred abruptly after the election, without any prior indication of performance issues or organizational restructuring. According to his account, "*he was removed from his role as a division head and reassigned as a sub-district secretary solely because he was perceived as not politically aligned with the new leadership, despite the absence of any performance-related problems*" (ASN-02, interview, 14 March 2025). Such experiences illustrate how civil servant mobility is redefined as an extension of electoral competition, where bureaucratic positions are redistributed to consolidate political control.

Another informant highlighted that official justifications for transfers were often framed in neutral or normative language, such as "career development" or "organizational needs," but rarely reflected the actual motivations behind the decisions. He explained that "*although his transfer was formally justified as part of career development, he was aware that an "insider" sought his former position, resulting in his reassignment to a structural role outside his area of expertise*" (ASN-03, interview, 16 March 2025). This discrepancy between formal narratives and informal realities underscores the symbolic use of administrative rationales to legitimize politically driven decisions.

These perceptions were reinforced by non-ASF informants who possess broader institutional knowledge of local bureaucratic practices. A former senior civil servant observed that "*transfers in the regency have long ceased to reflect organizational needs and are instead determined by access and personal proximity to political power*" (Former ASN, interview, 18 March 2025). Likewise, a member of the Regional House of Representatives noted that large-scale bureaucratic reshuffles have become a routine pattern following each local election, reflecting a recurring cycle of political intervention in administrative structures (DPRD Member, interview, 20 March 2025). An academic informant further emphasized that "*such transfer practices indicate the persistent vulnerability of the bureaucracy to political influence, demonstrating that administrative neutrality has not been fully institutionalized*" (Academic, interview, 22 March 2025).

From an analytical perspective, these findings align closely with the literature on bureaucratic politicization, which conceptualizes bureaucracies as arenas of political intervention when elected officials seek to secure loyalty and control (Peters, 2013). In the context of Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, civil servant transfers appear to function less as mechanisms of talent management and more as tools of post-electoral consolidation. Geddes (1994) rational-choice framework is particularly instructive here, as it explains how political leaders prioritize political survival and the construction of loyal political machines over the pursuit of effective and professional governance. Consequently, merit-based logic is systematically subordinated to political calculations.

Procedural Opacity and the Hollowing of Formal Transfer Mechanisms

Beyond political motivation, the study reveals a pervasive lack of transparency and

procedural accountability in the civil servant transfer process. Informants consistently reported that transfers were executed without formal performance evaluations, documented assessments, or meaningful consultation with the affected individuals. One civil servant emphasized that "*despite consistently receiving positive performance appraisals, his transfer occurred without any discussion or recommendation from Baperjakat, as the official decree was issued directly*" (ASN-01, interview, 12 March 2025). This account highlights a significant procedural gap between formal regulations and actual practice.

Another informant echoed this concern by stating that "*no job review, clarification process, or performance-based assessment was conducted prior to his reassignment, even though Baperjakat approval is formally required under existing regulations*" (ASN-02, interview, 14 March 2025). These experiences suggest that formal procedures are frequently bypassed, reducing regulatory frameworks to symbolic compliance rather than substantive safeguards.

The marginal role of Badan Pertimbangan Jabatan dan Kepangkatan (Baperjakat) emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews. One informant explained that "*when he sought clarification from Baperjakat, he was informed that the body was consulted merely as a formality and that final decisions remained entirely under the authority of the regional head*" (ASN-03, interview, 16 March 2025). This perception was corroborated by a former senior bureaucrat, who noted that Baperjakat "*functions largely as an administrative accessory, while substantive decisions are made in advance through informal political channels*" (Former ASN, interview, 18 March 2025).

A legislative informant explicitly attributed this procedural opacity to executive dominance, stating that "*although formal mechanisms governing transfers are clearly stipulated, in practice decision-making authority is highly centralized in the hands of the regional head*" (DPRD Member, interview, 20 March 2025). An academic informant conceptualized this condition as a form of institutional failure, arguing that "*when formal mechanisms fail to operate effectively, the merit system is reduced to an administrative ritual devoid of substantive meaning*" (Academic, interview, 22 March 2025).

Analytically, this condition reflects what Sousa and Van Dijk (2021) describe as the hollowing of accountability, whereby formal rules and procedures exist but lack enforcement capacity. Decision-making becomes concentrated within executive authority, while technocratic institutions are relegated to ceremonial roles. In such contexts, bureaucratic reform remains procedural rather than transformative, focusing on regulatory compliance without altering underlying power relations or organizational culture.

Relational Bias and the Institutionalization of Neo-Patrimonial Practices

A central empirical contribution of this study lies in identifying relational bias as the dominant determinant of civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency. Informants described multiple forms of relational bias, including political loyalty, personal closeness, kinship ties, and patronage networks. One civil servant noted that "*the individual who replaced him was part of the electoral campaign team and maintained a close personal relationship with the regent*" (ASN-01, interview, 12 March 2025). Another informant observed that "*many officials were transferred because they were not considered insiders, while strategic positions were awarded to those who actively participated in campaigning activities*" (ASN-02, interview, 14 March 2025).

Kinship and patronage were also frequently cited as influential factors. One informant

explained that "*some officials were retained because they shared clan or village ties with political elites, and there were widespread rumors that positions could be secured through informal exchanges or economic patronage*" (ASN-03, interview, 16 March 2025). A former senior bureaucrat summarized the prevailing logic succinctly, stating that "*professional competence has become secondary to personal connections, as what matters most is who one knows rather than what one can do*" (Former ASN, interview, 18 March 2025).

These findings point to the operation of neo-patrimonialism, wherein formal rational–legal institutions coexist with informal personalistic networks that shape actual decision-making (Hidayat, 2021). In such systems, merit-based procedures are formally preserved but substantively overridden by patron–client relations. As Nurmandi and Kim (2015) argue, bureaucratic positions in decentralized governance systems often function as political resources, redistributed to maintain elite coalitions and secure loyalty rather than to enhance administrative capacity.

Relational Bias as a Cultural–Structural Phenomenon in Local Bureaucratic Governance

Beyond its political dimension, relational bias in civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency must be understood as a cultural–structural phenomenon embedded within local governance practices. Informants consistently emphasized that political considerations intersect with deeply rooted kinship ties, regional affiliations, and informal social obligations. These socio-cultural dynamics do not merely accompany bureaucratic decision-making; rather, they actively shape and legitimize it.

A member of the regional legislature explained that "*strong kinship relations and shared regional identities frequently enter transfer considerations, as family and territorial bonds are socially recognized and often normalized within local political culture*" (DPRD Member, interview, 20 March 2025). This observation was echoed by an academic informant, who noted that "*relational bias in the regency has evolved into a systemic practice, reflecting a modern form of patronage institutionalized within formal bureaucratic structures*" (Academic, interview, 22 March 2025).

These accounts suggest that relational bias cannot be reduced to individual misconduct or isolated political intervention. Instead, it reflects a hybrid governance arrangement, in which formal meritocratic rules coexist with informal norms of loyalty, reciprocity, and kinship. In such contexts, administrative rationality is frequently subordinated to social expectations, making impartial decision-making difficult to sustain. This pattern closely aligns with the concept of neo-patrimonialism, where modern bureaucratic institutions operate alongside traditional personalistic authority structures (Hidayat, 2021).

In Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, relational bias appears to be socially embedded and morally justified within local contexts. Informants suggested that decisions based on familial or regional proximity are often perceived as socially appropriate rather than administratively problematic. One former senior bureaucrat observed that "*such practices are rarely questioned internally, as personal loyalty and shared identity are viewed as legitimate considerations in leadership decisions*" (Former ASN, interview, 18 March 2025). This normalization weakens institutional resistance to patronage and reinforces informal power networks within the bureaucracy.

From a theoretical standpoint, this condition reflects the persistence of embedded patronage, where informal norms gradually displace formal administrative logic. While decentralization reforms were intended to enhance responsiveness and accountability, they have also created new opportunities for local elites to consolidate power through bureaucratic appointments. As a result, merit-based reforms remain vulnerable to capture by localized political and cultural forces.

Psychological Insecurity, Declining Motivation, and the Erosion of Professional Identity

The study further reveals that non-merit-based transfers have profound implications for the psychological well-being, motivation, and professional identity of civil servants. Informants consistently described feelings of insecurity, frustration, and disillusionment following politically motivated transfers. One civil servant expressed that "*the experience of being transferred due to relational considerations significantly diminished his motivation, as professional achievement appeared irrelevant in determining career outcomes*" (ASN-01, interview, 12 March 2025). He noted that "*when positions can be taken away because of personal connections, striving for excellence loses its meaning*".

Another informant highlighted the broader organizational consequences of this dynamic, observing that "*many civil servants increasingly prioritize cultivating political connections over improving technical competence, as relational capital is perceived as more valuable than professional performance*" (ASN-02, interview, 14 March 2025). This shift in orientation reflects a fundamental erosion of professional norms within the bureaucracy.

Psychological stress and uncertainty were also recurrent themes. One informant described that "*civil servants often experience anxiety and insecurity, as transfers can occur abruptly without clear justification, undermining any sense of career stability*" (ASN-03, interview, 16 March 2025). Such conditions weaken organizational commitment and foster a climate of fear rather than professionalism.

A former senior bureaucrat warned that "*if non-merit-based transfers continue unchecked, the bureaucracy will increasingly be populated by loyalists rather than competent professionals*" (Former ASN, interview, 18 March 2025). This concern highlights the long-term risks of substituting competence with loyalty in public administration.

These findings are consistent with broader literature emphasizing the importance of procedural justice in sustaining motivation and organizational commitment. When civil servants perceive decision-making processes as unfair or arbitrary, intrinsic motivation declines and professional identity weakens. Prabowo (2022) argues that bureaucracies managed without meritocratic principles are prone to declining performance and weakened institutional legitimacy. Similarly, empirical studies by Ode and Fauzan (2020) demonstrate that opaque and politicized personnel management significantly reduces job satisfaction and organizational loyalty among civil servants.

In Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, the erosion of professional identity manifests in adaptive strategies oriented toward survival rather than service. Civil servants learn to navigate informal power structures, limit initiative, and avoid innovation, as proactive behavior may increase political vulnerability. Over time, this adaptive behavior becomes institutionalized,

reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of low performance and political dependence.

Organizational Inefficiency and the Decline of Public Service Quality

The consequences of non-merit-based transfers extend beyond individual civil servants to affect organizational effectiveness and public service delivery. Informants emphasized that transfers often result in job mismatch, whereby officials are assigned to positions that do not correspond to their technical expertise or professional background. One legislative informant observed that "*public service performance frequently deteriorates because newly appointed officials lack sufficient understanding of the sectors they are assigned to manage*" (DPRD Member, interview, 20 March 2025).

This condition was corroborated by an academic informant, who explained that "*misalignment between position requirements and individual competencies slows decision-making processes and reduces the quality-of-service outputs*" (Academic, interview, 22 March 2025). Such inefficiencies undermine the core objectives of bureaucratic reform, which seeks to enhance responsiveness, effectiveness, and citizen satisfaction.

The organizational costs of frequent and politically driven transfers are substantial. Constant reshuffling disrupts institutional memory, weakens coordination, and hampers long-term planning. Civil servants require time to adapt to new roles, and when transfers occur repeatedly without clear justification, organizational learning is compromised. Elazhari and Siregar (2025) similarly find that competence mismatch among structural officials contributes to declining unit performance and increasing public complaints.

In the context of public service delivery, these dynamics translate into delayed services, inconsistent policy implementation, and declining trust in local government institutions. As Nurmandi and Kim (2015) note, bureaucratic professionalism is a critical determinant of governance outcomes in decentralized systems. When professionalism is undermined by patronage and politicization, public service quality inevitably suffers.

Importantly, informants emphasized that citizens are often aware of these dynamics. The visibility of politically motivated appointments reinforces public perceptions that bureaucratic decisions are driven by elite interests rather than public needs. Over time, this perception erodes trust in government and weakens the social contract between citizens and the state.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of the merit system in civil servant transfers in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency remains largely ineffective. Despite the existence of a comprehensive regulatory framework governing civil service management in Indonesia, transfer practices at the local level continue to be dominated by non-merit considerations, particularly relational bias linked to post-election political interests, personal proximity, kinship ties, and patronage networks. Consequently, the core principles of professionalism, objectivity, and neutrality that underpin bureaucratic reform have not been fully realized in practice.

The findings further reveal that civil servant transfers are frequently used as instruments of post-electoral political consolidation rather than as tools for talent management or organizational optimization. Civil servants perceived as politically misaligned are more

vulnerable to reassignment regardless of their competence or performance, while the transfer process itself lacks transparency and procedural accountability. Formal mechanisms such as performance evaluation and the advisory role of Baperjakat function largely as administrative formalities and fail to effectively constrain executive discretion. As a result, relational bias operates systemically and becomes normalized within local political culture, reflecting a neo-patrimonial governance pattern in which personal loyalty outweighs impersonal rules.

The consequences of non-merit-based transfers are evident at multiple levels, undermining civil servant motivation and professional identity, weakening organizational capacity, and ultimately reducing the quality of public service delivery and public trust in local government. This study contributes theoretically by enriching the literature on bureaucratic politicization and neo-patrimonialism in decentralized governance contexts, and empirically by providing qualitative insights into the micro-level operation of merit system distortion. While the single-case design limits generalizability, the findings offer context-specific policy relevance for local governments and oversight institutions such as KASN, and point to the need for future comparative and mixed-methods research to deepen understanding of merit system implementation in decentralized settings.

Acknowledgement

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