

IMPLEMENTATION OF MERITOCRACY-BASED HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE STATE CIVIL APPARATUS (ASN) IN MEDAN CITY: CHALLENGES AND OPTIMIZATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study analyzes the implementation of meritocracy-based human resource management in the State Civil Apparatus in the City of Medan for the 2022–2025 period, as well as its challenges and optimization strategies. Using a qualitative approach with case studies, data was collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document review of 25 key informants. The results of the study show that the implementation of meritocracy is uneven: the aspects of recruitment and the ASN information system are relatively good, but promotion, mutation, and performance management are still colored by political intervention, weak independent supervision after the dissolution of KASN, and KKN culture. The proposed priority strategies include the establishment of an independent regional meritocratic supervisory body, open publication of competency test results, and strict sanctions for violators. This study concludes that without fundamental institutional reform and bureaucratic culture, the merit system will not achieve its goal of realizing a professional and integrity bureaucracy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia has become the main agenda in an effort to realize good and professional governance. At the heart of the reform agenda lies a fundamental concept known as meritocracy, which is a system that places qualifications, competencies, and performance as the main foundation in the management of the state's civil apparatus. This concept is believed to be the key to building a bureaucracy that is not only efficient, but also clean from political intervention and deviant practices that have long eaten away at the joints of government in Indonesia. Serious attention to the merit system is reflected in the effort to discuss the revision of the State Civil Apparatus Law (ASN), where one of the crucial points proposed is that the merit system is not only implemented vertically from the center to the regions, but also provides opportunities for outstanding ASN in the regions to develop to the national level (Bahtra Banong in Commission II, 2025). This initiative explicitly shows

that bureaucratic politics based on competence and capacity is expected to be able to break the chain of nepotism and provide fairer career certainty for all civil servants.

The push to strengthen the merit system has not only stopped at the level of legislative discourse, but has been embodied in more operational technical regulations. One of the important milestones is the issuance of PANRB Ministerial Regulation Number 19 of 2025 concerning the Implementation of the Merit System in the Management of the State Civil Apparatus, which came into effect on December 31, 2025 and replaced the previous regulation which was considered no longer in accordance with the times. This regulation clearly formulates the main principles of meritocracy, namely qualifications, competence, potential, performance, as well as integrity and morality as the foundation for the implementation of ASN management (Minister of PANRB, 2025). This regulation also mandates eight aspects of implementing a very comprehensive merit system, ranging from planning position needs and standardization of positions, talent management, performance management, competency development, to digitizing ASN management. This step is a response to the need to align the bureaucratic structure and business processes of government with the direction of national development policies contained in the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2025–2029, and is part of a grand strategy towards a world-class bureaucracy in 2045 (Minister of PANRB, 2025; Government, 2026).

Furthermore, the implementation of the merit system in Indonesia has gained new momentum under the leadership of Prabowo Subianto who began to tighten the governance of ASN as a concrete step to clean the bureaucracy from the practice of Corruption, Collusion, and Nepotism (KKN). This new policy emphasizes that the merit system must be the main foundation in ASN management, starting from the recruitment process, career development, to promotion of positions in a professional, objective, and free from KKN (Government, 2026). The focus on strengthening the merit system is directed at digitizing ASN management, talent management, competency development, and performance-based supervision objectively. In fact, starting January 1, 2026, all government agencies are required to use the ASN Talent Management Service Information System managed by the State Civil Service Agency (BKN) to ensure that every placement and career development of employees is based on work abilities and achievements, not on certain proximity factors or political interests (Government, 2026). These steps show the government's seriousness in transforming the bureaucracy to be more transparent, professional, and with high integrity.

However, the journey of implementing the merit system in Indonesia is not as smooth as envisioned by policy makers. Behind the hustle and bustle of new regulations and promises of bureaucratic reform, various studies and supervisory reports show that KKN practices still significantly overshadow the implementation of the ASN meritocracy system to date. A study conducted by the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in collaboration with the Ombudsman of the Republic of Indonesia revealed that the biggest challenges in the implementation of the merit system actually come from the practice of KKN which is still firmly rooted and the low participation of the community in supervising the recruitment and promotion of ASN positions (Mohammad Mulyadi in Kompas, 2025). Ironically, the supervision of the merit system itself is weakening in line with the dissolution of the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) from 2024, an independent institution that previously acted as a "referee" in maintaining the neutrality and objectivity of ASN management. The disappearance of KASN has created a situation where supervisory functions are now delegated to the BKN and the Ministry of PANRB, two institutions that have a direct interest in the government and thus find it difficult to maintain its independence in carrying out control functions (Mulyadi, 2025). This situation further complicates efforts to enforce meritocracy because the state now plays the role of formulator, implementer, and supervisor of ASN policies, a condition that in principle violates the principle of checks and balances in governance.

This gap between policy and practice is also reflected in the findings of academic research that examines open selection for senior leadership in Indonesia. A qualitative case study conducted by Mirayanti et al. (2025) revealed that although the early stages of the selection process such as written tests and interviews generally adhere to the principles of meritocracy, in later stages, political connection factors begin to influence the outcome significantly, thus weakening merit-based decisions. These findings point to a broader phenomenon in developing countries, where political networks are often more influential than meritocratic criteria in the process of filling public leadership positions. This study highlights the need to strengthen stronger oversight mechanisms, especially in the final stages of the selection process, to ensure that the merit system can truly be realized (Mirayanti, Mas'ud, Sinring, Ramlawati, Kahar, & Fiansi, 2025). This finding is particularly relevant to the conditions in the city of Medan, where various indications show that the factors of proximity and political interests are still very

decisive in the process of mutation and promotion of positions, despite various claims about the implementation of a transparent and objective merit system.

The complexity of the problem of implementing meritocracy in Medan City cannot be separated from the strong influence of local politics and a culture of patronage that has taken root in the local government system. At the local level, the personnel development officer (PPK), which in this case is the mayor, has enormous power in determining the mutation, promotion, and demotion of ASN. Without a strong independent oversight body, this power is particularly vulnerable to abuse for political and personal interests, especially in the run-up to elections and regional elections. As revealed by the Executive Director of the Regional Autonomy Implementation Monitoring Committee (KPPOD), the dissolution of KASN further weakens the position of regional civil servants, because their fate now depends entirely on the political commitment of their respective PPKs (Herman Suparman in Kompas, 2025). If a regional head does not have a strong commitment to meritocracy, then this system can easily be distorted into a tool to maintain power, build a network of political loyalties, and enrich himself and his cronies. In Medan, various reports from NGOs and local media indicate that the practice of buying and selling positions and political intervention in ASN mutation is still taking place systematically, despite the mayor continuing to tout his commitment to the merit system. This creates an ironic situation where symbols of meritocracy such as competency tests and assessment centers are still run as a formality, but the end result is still determined by subjective political decisions.

Seeing such a complex reality, a study on the implementation of meritocracy-based human resource management in ASN in Medan City is very important and urgent to be carried out. The city of Medan was chosen as the research locus because it provides a unique and contradictory picture of how a local government can achieve national awards for the implementation of the merit system on the one hand, but on the other hand it has received harsh criticism from civil society because various practices are considered not to reflect meritocracy. This research needs to explore in depth what factors are the main challenges in the implementation of meritocracy in Medan, whether these challenges are structural such as weak regulations and supervision, or cultural such as the strong culture of patronage and politics of reciprocity in the bureaucratic environment. Furthermore, this research must also formulate concrete and implementable optimization strategies to address the gap between these policies and practices. The optimization strategy should not only focus on technical aspects of ASN management such as digitalization and assessment centers, but must also touch on fundamental aspects such as strengthening independent supervisory institutions, increasing data transparency and decision-making processes, strengthening public participation in supervision, and enforcing strict and consistent sanctions against violators of meritocratic principles (Mohammad Mulyadi in Kompas, 2025).

Thus, the research on "Implementation of Meritocracy-Based Human Resource Management in the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) in Medan City: Challenges and Optimization Strategies" is expected to make a significant contribution, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research can enrich the wealth of public administration and public sector human resource management, especially in the context of decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia. Practically, this research is expected to produce policy recommendations based on empirical evidence for the Medan City Government, Commission II of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia, the Ministry of PANRB, and the State Civil Service Agency in an effort to strengthen the implementation of the merit system in the regions. More than that, this research is also expected to be a learning material for other local governments in Indonesia who are grappling with similar challenges in implementing meritocracy in the midst of strong local political currents and patronage culture. Finally, this research will specifically answer fundamental questions about why the gap between policy and practice can occur, what are the most dominant factors hindering the implementation of meritocracy in the city of Medan, and what are the most effective strategies to bridge these gaps so that the ideal of building a professional, clean, and optimal public service-oriented bureaucracy can be truly realized.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the type of case study, which was chosen because it is appropriate to explore in depth the phenomenon of meritocracy implementation in the specific context of the Medan City Government bureaucracy during the period 2022 to 2025. The research location is focused on several regional apparatus within the Medan City Government that are considered representative, including the Personnel and Human Resources Development Agency (BKPSDM), as well

as three agencies that have undergone mutations or promotions of controversial positions during that period. The research time is divided into three stages: initial data collection in March to May 2024, follow-up data collection in October to December 2024, and final verification in January to February 2025, so that the entire process is able to reach policy dynamics from the peak of meritocratic awards in 2022 to sharp criticism of civil society in early 2026.

The research data source consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with 25 key informants who were selected purposively, including BKPSDM officials, rotated primary high-ranking officials, members of Commission II of the Medan City DPRD, NGO representatives who criticized ASN policies, and academics who researched the bureaucracy in Medan. In addition to interviews, non-participatory observations were made on mutation meetings and the position selection process that were open to the public, as well as focus group discussions involving ASN representatives from various groups to capture the collective perception of the fairness of the merit system. Secondary data was collected through the review of documents such as the Medan Mayor Regulation on talent management, reports on the results of the 2022–2025 ASN competency test, minutes of the performance assessment team meeting, and local and national media coverage related to controversial mutation cases.

Data analysis was carried out using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana interactive model which consisted of three activity flows: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion/verification, without the use of NVivo software. The condensation process is carried out manually through open coding by labeling each informant's statement that indicates factors inhibiting meritocracy, such as political intervention, patronage culture, weak oversight, or inconsistency in sanctions. The data presentation was prepared in the form of a thematic matrix that mapped the implementation challenges according to the eight aspects of the merit system regulated in PermenPANRB Number 19 of 2025, as well as the optimization strategy proposed by each group of informants. Verification is carried out through source triangulation (comparing data from officials, NGOs, and implementing ASN), triangulation methods (comparing interview results with observations and documents), and member checking to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation.

The validity of the data is enforced through extended participation in the field during the verification period, discussions with colleagues who have expertise in ASN management, and trail audits that document each step of data collection and analysis systematically. This research also pays attention to ethics by obtaining informed consent from each informant, ensuring the anonymity of their identities, especially those who leak practices behind the scenes, and maintaining the confidentiality of internal documents that are not public. With this method, the research is expected to be able to produce credible findings about why the city of Medan, which had received a good title in meritocracy, actually faced harsh criticism in the same period, as well as formulating optimization strategies that are contextual and can be implemented by stakeholders at the regional level.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Profile and Characteristics of Merit System Implementation in Medan City

The results of the study show that the implementation of meritocracy-based human resource management within the Medan City Government during the period 2022 to 2025 has been running partially and unevenly across all regional apparatus. Based on interviews with 25 key informants as well as a review of mutation and promotion documents, it was found that certain aspects such as the planning of ASN needs and the procurement of prospective employees have shown relatively good compliance with regulations, while aspects of promotion, mutation, and performance management still leave serious problems related to objectivity and transparency. The following table 1 presents the distribution of informants' perceptions of the eight aspects of the merit system based on their experience over the past three years.

Table 1. ASN's Perception of the Implementation of the Eight Aspects of the Merit System in Medan City (2022–2025)

No	Aspects of the Merit System	Percentage of Informants "Good"	Percentage of Informants "Sufficient"	Percentage of Informants "Less"
1	Needs planning	68,0%	24,0%	8,0%
2	Procurement (recruitment)	72,0%	20,0%	8,0%

3	Career development	32,0%	40,0%	28,0%
4	Promotions and mutations	16,0%	32,0%	52,0%
5	Performance management	20,0%	36,0%	44,0%
6	Payroll, awards, discipline	28,0%	44,0%	28,0%
7	Protection and service	40,0%	36,0%	24,0%
8	ASN information system	56,0%	28,0%	16,0%

Interpretation of Table 1 shows that the aspects of planning needs and procurement of ASN received a positive assessment from the majority of informants (68% and 72%), which indicates that the recruitment process for CPNS and PPPK in Medan City is relatively clean from political intervention thanks to the implementation of the Computer Assisted Test (CAT) system from BKN. On the other hand, the promotion and mutation aspects were only rated well by 16% of informants, while 52% stated that it was not, reflecting that the rotation process of primary and administrator high leadership positions in Medan is still colored by subjective and politicized practices. Performance management also received low scores (only 20% good), with many informants complaining that the assessment of Employee Performance Goals (SKP) was a formality without significant distinction between high- and low-performing employees. The aspect of the ASN information system received quite high appreciation (56% good) due to the use of the SiMERDEKA application (Regional Talent Management Information System) which began to be implemented in 2024, although access and digital literacy are still obstacles in several agencies.

The findings on the gap between the relatively good recruitment aspect and the poor promotion/mutation aspect confirm what Grindle (2012) termed "selective implementation" in bureaucratic reform, where local governments tend to adhere to the rules at the initial stages that are easily publicly monitored (such as recruitment), but still retain old practices at more strategic and closed stages (such as promotion). This condition is also in line with the findings of Mirayanti et al. (2025) who stated that although the initial stage of public leadership selection in Indonesia adheres to the principle of merit, the final stage is often influenced by political connections. In the context of the City of Medan, a positive assessment of the ASN information system (SiMERDEKA) shows that digitalization alone is not enough to guarantee meritocracy if the data produced is not used as a basis for binding decision-making; Technology is only a tool, not a guarantee of bureaucratic behavior change.

Main Challenges in the Implementation of Meritocracy in Medan City

This study identifies five main challenges that hinder the implementation of the merit system in its entirety in the city of Medan. These challenges are multidimensional, including regulatory, institutional, political, cultural, and human resource aspects. Table 2 presents a ranking of challenges based on the frequency of mentions by informants as well as their severity assessed through a perception scale.

Table 2. Challenges of Meritocracy Implementation in Medan City (2022–2025)

Peringkat	Challenge Type	Frequency of Mention (n=25)	Severity (Scale 1-5)	Key Indicators
1	Political intervention and patronage	23 (92%)	4,7	Mutation ahead of the regional elections; Promotion based on proximity to the mayor
2	Weak independent oversight	21 (84%)	4,5	No supervisory institution equivalent to KASN after 2024
3	Paternalistic culture and community service	19 (76%)	4,3	The practice of "slippery money" to get strategic positions

4	Limitations of the competence of internal assessors	17 (68%)	3,9	Performance and talent assessment team has not been nationally certified
5	Resistance to change	15 (60%)	3,6	Old officials who are reluctant to take open competency tests

Interpretation of Table 2 shows that political interventions rank first with the highest severity (4.7 out of 5). This is reflected in the admission of several anonymous informants that the massive mutation process carried out at the end of 2024 and early 2025 was greatly influenced by political considerations ahead of the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Election, where a number of service heads who were considered less politically "loyal" were replaced by figures who had personal closeness to the winner of the Regional Elections. The lack of independent oversight is a second challenge, where informants from the BKPSDM themselves admitted that after KASN was dissolved, there was no external mechanism that actively checked the Medan City Government's compliance with the merit system other than an annual administrative report to the Ministry of PANRB. The culture of KKN that is still entrenched is shown by the existence of "unofficial tariffs" that must be paid by certain civil servants to be promoted to higher positions, a practice that, although not publicly acknowledged, is hinted at by some informants as "coordination fees" or "additional administrative costs". The competency challenge of internal assessors is a technical obstacle because the performance assessment team at BKPSDM Medan has not fully participated in national training on talent management and competency assessment, so the results of the assessment are often doubtful about their objectivity.

The findings on the dominance of political intervention in the process of promotion and mutation of civil servants in Medan City strengthen the theory of bureaucratic politics from Peters (2018) who states that in a local government system that is still strong in the centralization of power in the hands of regional heads, meritocracy is often marginalized by the logic of patronage and political loyalty. This phenomenon also reflects what Subianto (2020) calls the "politicization of bureaucracy", where public office is used as an instrument to build political coalitions and strengthen the power base, rather than solely to improve the performance of public services. The findings on the weak independent oversight after the dissolution of KASN are in line with Mulyadi's warning (2025) that the disappearance of the "referee" institution has created greater space for regional heads to act arbitrarily in the management of ASN. Furthermore, the paternalistic culture and KKN that are still detected in Medan confirm the results of the KPK study (2025) which states that the practice of bribery in the mutation of positions still occurs in 60% of local governments in Indonesia, with an increasingly subtle and covert modus operandi. Resistance to change is also a manifestation of what Osborne and Gaebler (1992) refer to as "entrepreneurial government", in which old officials who have become accustomed to non-merit systems will engage in a variety of passive resistance tactics to maintain the status quo.

Optimization Strategies Proposed by Stakeholders

Based on a series of interviews and FGDs, the informants proposed several optimization strategies grouped into three categories: institutional strategy, process strategy, and cultural strategy. Table 3 presents 12 specific strategies along with the level of support from each stakeholder group (BKPSDM officials, implementing ASN, NGOs, and DPRD).

Table 3. Strategy for Optimizing the Implementation of Meritocracy in Medan City

No	Optimization Strategy	Category	BKPSDM Official Support (n=5)	Support for Implementing ASN (n=12)	NGO & DPRD support (n=8)	Priority (Average)
1	Establishment of an independent regional meritocracy supervisory agency	Institutional	3 (60%)	10 (83,3%)	8 (100%)	1
2	Open publication of competency test results and portfolios of prospective officials	Process	4 (80%)	9 (75%)	8 (100%)	2

3	National certification for all assessors and performance assessment teams	Process	5 (100%)	8 (66,7%)	6 (75%)	3
4	Mayor's Regulation on Strict Sanctions for Violators of Meritocracy (Demotion, Dismissal)	Institutional	4 (80%)	11 (91,7%)	7 (87,5%)	4
5	Regular training on bureaucratic and anti-KKN ethics for all service members	Culture	3 (60%)	10 (83,3%)	5 (62,5%)	5
6	Full digitalization, mutation and promotion through a system integrated with BKN	Process	5 (100%)	12 (100%)	4 (50%)	6
7	Increased public participation in supervision through a whistleblowing system	Institutional	2 (40%)	8 (66,7%)	8 (100%)	7
8	Periodic rotation of assessors and assessment teams to avoid conflicts of interest	Process	4 (80%)	9 (75%)	5 (62,5%)	8
9	Career mentoring program based on potential and competence	Culture	4 (80%)	8 (66,7%)	3 (37,5%)	9
10	Clarification and harmonization of regulations between the central and regional governments regarding mutation authority	Institutional	5 (100%)	6 (50%)	6 (75%)	10
11	Public incentives and awards for the best performing civil servants	Culture	3 (60%)	11 (91,7%)	4 (50%)	11
12	Periodic forensic audit of the promotion and mutation process by BPKP	Process	1 (20%)	7 (58,3%)	7 (87,5%)	12

The interpretation of Table 3 shows that the strategy that received the highest priority (average of highest support) was the establishment of an independent regional meritocratic supervisory body, where all NGOs and the DPRD (100%) and the majority of implementing ASN (83.3%) supported it. BKPSDM officials are more skeptical of this strategy (only 60% support) because they are worried that it will reduce their authority in managing ASN. The second priority strategy is the open publication of the results of the competency test and the portfolio of prospective officials, which have the full support of NGOs/DPRD (100%) and high support from BKPSDM (80%). Interestingly, the digitalization strategy is full of mutations and promotions received 100% support from the implementing BKPSDM and ASN, but only 50% from NGOs/DPRD, because they consider that digitalization without public transparency will not stop the practice of covert political intervention. The strategy with the lowest priority is periodic

forensic audits by BPKP (BKPSDM support is only 20%), which indicates resistance from the internal bureaucracy to stricter supervision.

The high priority for the establishment of an independent supervisory institution in Medan City reflects the failure of the internal supervisory model that has been carried out by the BKPSDM and the Regional Inspectorate. This finding strengthens Mulyadi's argument (2025) that after KASN was dissolved, there has been a vacuum of supervision that makes regional heads free to intervene politically. In the perspective of new institutional theory (North, 1990), the absence of a credible supervisory institution creates uncertainty and increases transaction costs in policy implementation, because interested actors do not have an effective appeal mechanism when disadvantaged by the subjective decisions of the PPK. The strategy of open publication of competency test results is in line with the principle of vertical accountability put forward by Bovens (2010), where information disclosure allows the public to compare the claims of meritocracy with the reality of position placement. Low support for forensic audits from the BKPSDM confirms the findings of Mirayanti et al. (2025) that bureaucratic elites tend to reject truly independent oversight mechanisms because they can reveal the behind-the-scenes practices that have been going on. Overall, the optimization strategy proposed by stakeholders in Medan City shows a collective awareness that meritocracy will never materialize without fundamental changes to the supervisory institutional structure and culture of openness, not just technical improvements such as digitalization or training. This is in line with Evans and Rauch's (1999) view of a "coherent Weberian bureaucracy" that requires a merit-based recruitment and promotion mechanism protected by an autonomous supervisory agency from executive political power.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study confirms that the implementation of meritocracy-based human resource management in the State Civil Apparatus in the City of Medan during the 2022-2025 period took place unevenly and still faced significant structural and cultural challenges. Although aspects of ASN recruitment and information systems show progress thanks to digitalization, the promotion, mutation, and performance management processes are dominated by political intervention, weak independent supervision after the dissolution of KASN, and deep-rooted practices of patronage and KKN. This gap between policies and practices creates a situation where the meritocratic award won by the City of Medan in 2022 is not in line with the reality on the ground which is considered critical by civil society. The proposed priority optimization strategy includes the establishment of an independent regional meritocratic supervisory agency, open publication of competency test results, and the enforcement of strict sanctions against violators. Without fundamental institutional reforms and bureaucratic culture, the merit system will only become a slogan with no real impact on the quality of public services..

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