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MERIT SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION AND POLITICAL INTERVENTION IN SCHOOL PRINCIPAL APPOINTMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF BENER MERIAH REGENCY, INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the implementation of the merit system in the appointment of school principals in Bener Meriah Regency, to identify structural, regulatory, and cultural barriers affecting its implementation, and to evaluate the extent to which the dominance of regional leaders and local political actors influences the objectivity, transparency, and independence of the selection process. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected over a ten-month period, from February to November 2025, through in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, field observations, document analysis, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a perception survey used as supporting data to strengthen qualitative findings. The results indicate that, normatively, the Government of Bener Meriah Regency has established a regulatory framework supporting the merit system, including Regent Regulation Number 37 of 2020. However, substantively, its implementation remains limited and faces significant challenges. The findings reveal a meritocratic distortion, whereby formal administrative procedures and competency assessments function largely as procedural formalities, while final decisions are shaped by discretionary authority, informal networks, and local political interests. Survey results show that 60% of respondents acknowledge moderate to high levels of political intervention, including political recommendations and personal proximity to regional power elites. Technical constraints further weaken credibility, such as limited integration of personnel information systems and insufficient assessor capacity. Strengthening the merit system requires firm political commitment, institutional capacity building, and independent oversight mechanisms

KEYWORDS: Merit System, Political Intervention, School Principals, Regional Bureaucracy, Bener Meriah.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic reform constitutes a strategic national agenda aimed at establishing governance that is effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable (Judy Brown *et al.*, 2015; Wihantoro, 2012). One of the central pillars of this reform agenda is the improvement of the quality of the State Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara/ASN) as key actors in government administration and public service delivery. In the context of contemporary public administration, ASN are no longer positioned merely as administrative executors, but rather as strategic human resources whose performance significantly determines the success of national development and public service outcomes (Aris, 2018; Bagenda *et al.*, 2026).

Accordingly, the management of ASN is required to be oriented toward professionalism, integrity, and competency-based performance in order to support the realization of good governance (Luhuringbudi *et al.*, 2025;). Within this context, the implementation of a merit system has become a fundamental instrument for building a modern, equitable, and competitive bureaucracy. The merit system emphasizes that all aspects of ASN management—including recruitment, promotion, transfer, and career development—must be based on measurable qualifications, competencies, and performance (Qomar & Ahkam, 2025; Sudrajat *et al.*, n.d.).

Conceptually, this principle seeks to eliminate practices of patronage, nepotism, and bureaucratic politicization, which have long been identified as major contributors to inefficiency and the declining quality of public services in developing countries, including Indonesia (Qomar & Ahkam, 2025; Sudrajat *et al.*, n.d.). Through the merit system, ASN are expected to perform their duties objectively, independently, and free from short-term political pressures, thereby strengthening institutional integrity and public trust (Putra *et al.*, 2020; Setyowati, 2016a). The state's commitment to implementing meritocracy within the bureaucracy is legally affirmed through Law Number 20 of 2023 concerning the State Civil Apparatus. This law explicitly mandates that ASN management be conducted in accordance with the principles of merit, professionalism, neutrality, and accountability (Oliveira *et al.*, 2024; Putra *et al.*, 2020). These provisions are further reinforced by Government Regulation Number 11 of 2017 on Civil Servant Management, which comprehensively regulates open, competitive, and competency-based mechanisms for filling public positions (Kane *et al.*,

2016; Malik & Prasajo, 2023). Moreover, within the education sector, various derivative regulations issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology govern the assignment of teachers as school principals through selection stages that emphasize managerial competence, academic supervision, and instructional leadership (Novak *et al.*, 2019; Pagliari, 2012). Normatively, these regulatory frameworks reflect the government's intention to institutionalize merit-based governance across sectors (Fabozzi, 2025).

From the perspective of good governance, the merit system is designed not only to enhance the quality of ASN, but also to function as an institutional safeguard against political intervention (Charron *et al.*, 2016; Evans & Fraser, 2012; Henderson *et al.*, 2007). Theoretically, merit-based personnel management serves as a mechanism to limit executive discretion, ensuring that appointment authority is not exploited as a tool for political consolidation or patronage distribution. (Evans & Fraser, 2012; Fadilla *et al.*, 2024).

Consequently, the filling of public positions is expected to be carried out transparently, objectively, and based on organizational needs rather than personal, factional, or political interests. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that the implementation of the merit system in regional bureaucratic practices continues to face significant structural and cultural challenges (Evans & Fraser, 2012; Fadilla *et al.*, 2024). Reports published by the National Civil Service Agency (Badan Kepegawaian Negara/BKN) and the State Civil Apparatus Commission (Komisi Aparatur Sipil Negara/KASN) reveal that although the number of government institutions achieving good merit system ratings has increased in recent years, a substantial number of institutions—particularly at the local government level—have yet to meet optimal standards of merit-based management (Fernandez & Cheema, 2025; Upadhyaya, 2025).

This condition reflects a persistent gap between policy design at the central level and policy implementation at the regional level. This gap becomes increasingly evident in the practice of filling strategic positions in the regions, including the appointment of school principals. Although formally regulated through selection mechanisms and competency assessments, the appointment process in practice often occurs within a space of compromise between administrative legal norms and local political interests. The position of school principal, which is substantively technocratic and professional in nature, is frequently perceived as a strategic

bureaucratic role that can be leveraged to build loyalty networks and political support bases at the local level.(Cornell & Grimes, 2023; Liu, 2025; Maysura, 2025)As a result, meritocratic procedures are vulnerable to distortion through informal interventions and discretionary decision-making by political elites.

Bener Meriah Regency, as one of the autonomous regions in Aceh Province, demonstrates dynamics consistent with this broader phenomenon. On the one hand, the local government has begun to show formal compliance with KASN recommendations in the appointment of high-ranking leadership positions, indicating an effort to align regional bureaucratic practices with meritocratic principles. On the other hand, the appointment of school principals continues to reveal indications of inconsistent and suboptimal implementation of the merit system. Among the hundreds of primary and secondary schools in Bener Meriah Regency, a significant number of teachers who administratively meet the formal requirements for appointment as school principals have not undergone genuinely open, competitive, and objectively assessed selection processes.

Selection procedures that tend to be closed, limited transparency in assessment results, and the dominance of discretion exercised by regional heads and local political elites suggest that meritocratic principles have not been fully institutionalized within regional education governance. This condition underscores the continued strength of political will and elite influence in shaping personnel policies at the local level, particularly within the education sector, which remains vulnerable to bureaucratic politicization.

The urgency of this research is further underscored by the strategic role of school principals within the education system. School principals function not only as administrative managers, but also as instructional leaders who shape the academic climate, influence school management quality, and determine the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates a strong correlation between the quality of school leadership and teacher performance, instructional quality, and student learning outcomes. (Hsieh et al., 2024; Kemethofer et al., 2025). Therefore, when the recruitment and appointment of school principals are not conducted in accordance with meritocratic principles, the consequences extend beyond administrative deficiencies and may result in systemic declines in educational quality(Kemethofer et al., 2025; Pitriani,

2024).

Based on these conditions, this research is both important and relevant. This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the implementation of the merit system in the appointment of school principals in Bener Meriah Regency, to identify structural, regulatory, and cultural barriers affecting its implementation, and to evaluate the extent to which the dominance of regional heads and local political actors influences the objectivity, transparency, and independence of the selection process.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to generate an in-depth and contextual understanding of the implementation of the merit system policy in the appointment of school principals in Bener Meriah Regency. The qualitative approach is employed because it enables a comprehensive exploration of policy dynamics shaped by the interaction between formal regulatory frameworks, bureaucratic actors, and local political influences—dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this study conceptualizes social reality as a product of actors' meaning-making processes, positioning the researcher as the primary instrument for interpreting empirical data.

Data were collected over a ten-month period, from February to November 2025, through purposive sampling involving 20 key informants representing critical stakeholders, including structural officials from the Regional Personnel and Human Resources Development Agency (BKPSDM) and the Department of Education, representatives of the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN), actively serving school principals appointed through both competitive selection and direct assignment, school supervisors, and education community figures. To ensure analytical rigor and credibility, data collection employed methodological triangulation, encompassing semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture informants' perceptions and experiences, direct observation of selection processes, inauguration procedures, and administrative practices, and document analysis of regional regulations and official selection records. These methods were complemented by focus group discussions aimed at validating preliminary findings and formulating policy-relevant recommendations, as well as a perception survey used as supporting data to map broader views on transparency and fairness.

Data analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, involving systematic stages of transcription, initial coding, theme development and refinement, and conclusion drawing. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through triangulation of data sources, methods, and time, alongside member checking with key informants to enhance the validity and interpretive accuracy of the analysis.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Overview Of the Implementation of the Merit System Policy*

Normatively, the Government of Bener Meriah Regency has institutionalized a regulatory architecture designed to facilitate the implementation of merit-based governance in the management of the State Civil Apparatus (Aparatur Sipil Negara/ASN), particularly within the education sector. A central legal instrument underpinning this framework is Regent Regulation Number 37 of 2020, which explicitly stipulates that the appointment of school principals must be grounded in objective criteria, including professional competence, formal qualifications, and demonstrated performance.

This regulation signifies a formalized local commitment to embedding meritocratic standards within personnel administration, in line with the broader national agenda of bureaucratic reform and the depoliticization of public office appointments. Within this governance structure, the Department of Education and the Regional Personnel and Human Resources Development Agency (BKPSDM) function as key administrative actors mandated to operationalize these normative provisions into concrete institutional practices.

Empirical evidence reveals that, at the procedural level, these institutions have implemented a series of formalized selection stages that correspond to the regulatory mandates. The process encompasses administrative screening of candidates, verification of educator certification, assessment of rank and tenure requirements, and the administration of managerial competency evaluations. The structured sequencing of these stages indicates that merit-based criteria have been formally embedded within the procedural design of the appointment mechanism. From an institutional perspective, this reflects a degree of regulatory compliance and demonstrates that meritocratic principles have been codified and partially operationalized within the local bureaucratic apparatus.

Beyond mere procedural adherence, the existence

of these formal mechanisms underscores an important dimension of governance reform: the translation of normative commitments into routinized administrative practices. The incorporation of competence-based assessments and eligibility verification mechanisms suggests that the merit system has achieved a level of structural institutionalization within the governance framework of educational leadership appointments. In this sense, the policy design exhibits formal coherence between regulatory intent and administrative implementation, signaling that the merit system is not merely rhetorical but has been structurally integrated into the official architecture of personnel management.

However, despite the availability and implementation of these formal mechanisms, the findings of this study reveal that the application of the merit system remains limited and has not yet fully embodied meritocratic principles in a substantive sense. Although administrative procedures and competency-based assessments are formally conducted, final decisions regarding the appointment of school principals are not consistently determined by objective assessment results.

Instead, the study identifies that non-merit considerations—such as discretionary authority, informal networks, and local political dynamics—continue to exert significant influence over final appointment outcomes. This situation reveals a clear gap between policy as written and policy as practiced, underscoring weaknesses in the integrity and consistency of merit system implementation.

Such discrepancies reflect a structural tension between formal bureaucratic rationality and informal political realities at the local level. While the merit system has been institutionally acknowledged, its implementation remains constrained by contextual factors, including power relations, organizational culture, and political intervention in decision-making processes. As a result, merit-based procedures tend to function more as administrative rituals rather than as decisive instruments guiding the selection of school leadership. This finding is consistent with public administration literature, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of merit system implementation depends not only on the existence of regulatory frameworks but also on political commitment, institutional autonomy, and the capacity for oversight and enforcement.

To capture these dynamics comprehensively, this study involved 20 key informants representing a wide range of stakeholders within the local education governance system. The informants included school

principals appointed through both competitive selection and direct assignment mechanisms, school supervisors, senior teachers, officials from the Education Office and BKPSDM, representatives of

school committees, and members of the broader education community. The demographic and professional profiles of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of Research Informants

Code	Position / Background	Age (Years)	Length of Service	Education Level	Highest Educational Attainment
R1	Elementary School Principal	45	8 years	Elementary	Bachelor's Degree in Education
R2	Junior High School Principal	50	10 years	Junior High	Master's Degree in Management
R3	School Supervisor	53	15 years	-	Master's Degree in Education
R4	Education Office Official	48	5 years	-	Master's Degree in Administration
R5	School Committee Chairperson	55	3 years	-	Senior High School
R6	Senior Teacher	42	18 years	Elementary	Bachelor's Degree in Education
R7	BKPSDM Staff	40	10 years	-	Bachelor's Degree in Law

The diversity of informants in terms of institutional roles, professional experience, educational background, and tenure enabled this study to examine the implementation of the merit system from multiple perspectives. Bureaucratic actors provided insights into formal procedures and administrative constraints, education practitioners reflected on the practical implications of principal appointments for school management, while community representatives articulated critical perceptions related to transparency, fairness, and accountability. This plurality of perspectives enhances the analytical depth of the findings and allows for a more nuanced understanding of how merit system policies are interpreted, negotiated, and contested within local governance structures.

3.2. Actors' Understanding and Perceptions of the Merit System

The findings derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) indicate that the majority of informants possess a relatively sound conceptual understanding of the merit system as a principle of public personnel management. School principals, school supervisors, and government officials consistently articulated the merit system as a mechanism for leadership appointment that should be based on educational qualifications, managerial competence, and demonstrated performance records. In their narratives, the merit system was frequently associated with ideals of professionalism, fairness, objectivity, and transparency, and was explicitly contrasted with practices of nepotism, favoritism, and patronage that have historically characterized bureaucratic appointments in many local government contexts.

At the normative level, informants demonstrated awareness that merit-based appointments are an integral component of national bureaucratic reform agendas and are legally mandated through various regulatory instruments. Several respondents emphasized that the merit system is intended to ensure that school leadership positions are occupied by individuals with adequate professional capacity and integrity, thereby contributing to improved school governance and educational outcomes. This indicates that, cognitively, key actors have internalized the formal discourse of meritocracy and recognize its importance as a standard for good governance within the education sector.

However, this relatively strong conceptual understanding is not fully aligned with informants' perceptions of how the merit system is implemented in practice. Across interviews and FGDs, informants consistently expressed skepticism regarding the substantive application of meritocratic principles in the appointment of school principals. A recurring theme in the discussions was the perceived disjunction between formal procedures and actual outcomes. Common expressions such as "the process follows the rules, but the results do not reflect the scores" and "the procedures are merit-based, but the decisions are political" illustrate a widespread belief that merit operates more at the procedural level than at the level of final decision-making.

These perceptions point to the presence of what institutional theory describes as policy decoupling, namely a condition in which formal rules and structures are adopted symbolically to signal compliance with external norms, while day-to-day practices continue to be shaped by informal logics and interests. In this case, informants perceived that merit-based mechanisms—such as competency tests

and administrative screening – are conducted largely as formalities, whereas final appointment decisions are influenced by discretionary authority, informal networks, and political considerations. As a result, the merit system is viewed less as a binding decision-making framework and more as an administrative requirement that must be fulfilled before informal negotiations take place.

Importantly, this perception was shared not only by education practitioners but also, to some extent, by bureaucratic actors themselves. Some officials acknowledged that while the merit system provides a formal reference, it is not always decisive in determining outcomes, particularly when political interests are involved. This acknowledgment suggests an implicit normalization of the gap between formal norms and practical realities, which further reinforces skepticism among school-level actors. For principals and teachers, this condition generates a sense of uncertainty and distrust toward the fairness of the appointment system, as professional competence does not always translate into career advancement.

Moreover, differences in perception were observed across actor groups. While bureaucratic actors tended to frame deviations from merit principles as unavoidable consequences of political discretion or contextual constraints, education practitioners more frequently interpreted such deviations as violations of fairness and professional ethics. Community representatives, meanwhile, emphasized the lack of transparency in explaining appointment decisions, which further deepened public suspicion regarding the integrity of the process. These divergent perspectives highlight how actors' institutional positions shape their interpretation of the merit system and its perceived legitimacy.

3.3. Dominance Of the Regional Head and Political Intervention

One of the most consequential findings of this study lies in the entrenched dominance of political authority – particularly that of the regional head – in the terminal phase of the school principal appointment process. Despite the formal institutionalization of merit-based procedures, including administrative eligibility screening, competency-based assessments, and structured evaluative mechanisms, the empirical evidence demonstrates that ultimate decision-making authority remains highly centralized and politically mediated. The discretionary prerogative vested in

the regional head functions not merely as a ceremonial ratification mechanism but as a substantively determinative locus of power.

This configuration reveals a structural paradox within the governance architecture of merit-based reform. On the one hand, procedural instruments aligned with meritocratic principles have been codified and operationalized within the bureaucratic apparatus. On the other hand, the concentration of executive discretion at the apex of local political authority generates a permissive institutional environment in which political considerations may override technocratic evaluations. In this respect, the merit system appears to operate within a framework of bounded autonomy, where formal compliance does not necessarily guarantee insulation from political intervention.

The perception survey findings provide quantitative corroboration of this institutional tension. Among the measured governance dimensions, the “external influence” indicator recorded the lowest mean score (2.5), substantially below dimensions related to procedural compliance and administrative implementation. This comparatively low score reflects a prevailing skepticism among respondents regarding the independence and objectivity of the appointment process. Such perceptions are analytically significant, as they indicate not merely isolated dissatisfaction but a broader legitimacy deficit in the governance of leadership appointments.

From an institutional theory perspective, these findings may be interpreted as indicative of a decoupling phenomenon, wherein formal regulatory structures symbolically conform to meritocratic standards while substantive decision-making remains embedded within political power configurations. The persistence of executive dominance underscores the resilience of patronage-oriented political logics within decentralized governance systems, even amid reformist institutional redesign. Consequently, the effectiveness of merit-based policy instruments cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of procedural adoption; rather, it must be assessed in relation to the distribution of decision authority and the structural conditions that shape its exercise.

The distribution of respondents' perceptions regarding the level of political intervention in the appointment of school principals is presented in Table 2

Table 2: Respondents' Perceptions of Political Intervention.

Level of Influence	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Moderately High-High	12	60%
Low	5	25%
None	3	15%
Total	20	100%

Source: Perception Survey Results (2025)

As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents (60%) explicitly acknowledged the presence of moderate to high levels of political intervention in the appointment process. Such interventions reportedly take various forms, including “political recommendations,” affiliations with the regional head’s campaign team, and personal or familial proximity to political elites.

Only a small proportion of respondents (15%) perceived the process as entirely free from political influence, while 25% assessed the level of intervention as relatively low. This distribution indicates that perceptions of political dominance are not isolated or incidental but are widely shared among education practitioners and bureaucratic actors at the local level.

Qualitative evidence from in-depth interviews further substantiates these quantitative findings. Several informants noted that the initial stages of selection—such as administrative verification and managerial competency testing—are generally conducted in an objective manner and in accordance with formal regulations. However, at the final stage of appointment, particularly during the approval process by the regional head acting as the Personnel Supervisory Officer (*Pejabat Pembina Kepegawaian*), selection outcomes frequently change in ways that cannot be adequately explained by competency scores or ranking results. This final decision-making stage is therefore perceived as the most vulnerable to political intervention.

Informal variables—such as *local origin* (*putra daerah* status), political loyalty, and past support during regional elections—often outweigh professional competence and performance indicators. Several informants reported cases in which candidates with lower competency scores were ultimately appointed due to their political proximity, while higher-performing candidates were sidelined because they were perceived as politically misaligned. This situation illustrates how merit-based logic is systematically undermined by the logic of power and patronage.

Within the analytical framework of this study, this phenomenon is conceptualized as meritocratic distortion, referring to a condition in which the merit system is formally adopted and procedurally

implemented, yet substantively compromised by political interests. Such distortion not only weakens the credibility of the selection process but also generates perceptions of injustice among teachers and education personnel. When career advancement is determined more by political considerations than by professional achievement, incentives to improve competence and performance are significantly diminished.

From the perspective of public administration and decentralization theory, these findings reflect the broader phenomenon of bureaucratic politicization at the local level following regional autonomy. The extensive authority granted to regional heads in managing civil servants—including the appointment of school principals—creates substantial opportunities for the use of strategic positions as instruments of political consolidation. In this context, school principals are no longer viewed solely as instructional leaders but also as politically strategic actors capable of influencing grassroots networks, public opinion, and local political legitimacy at the village and sub-district levels.

The dominance of the regional head in the appointment of school principals should not be understood merely as an administrative anomaly, but rather as a structural issue embedded in local power relations (Berdahl, 1990; Dill, 2001; Ramírez & Tejada, 2018). As long as mechanisms of checks and balances, independent oversight, and substantive transparency remain weak, the merit system will continue to be vulnerable to distortion. These findings underscore that the effective implementation of a merit-based system depends not only on regulatory design and technical procedures, but also—crucially—on political commitment and the capacity of oversight institutions to constrain excessive discretionary power.

3.4. Transparency And Accountability of the Selection Process

Based on the results of the perception survey administered to 20 respondents, procedural transparency obtained an average score of 3.5, which falls within the “good” category. This indicates that most respondents perceived the registration phase and the initial stages of the selection process as

relatively open and accessible. In particular, information related to eligibility requirements, administrative procedures, and the general timeline of selection was considered sufficiently clear. However, transparency scores declined markedly at later stages, especially with regard to the

announcement of results and the justification of final appointment decisions.

The distribution of respondents' perceptions regarding the level of transparency in the selection process is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions of Selection Transparency.

Assessment Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Good-Very Good	14	70%
Fair	5	25%
Poor	1	5%
Total	20	100%

Source: Perception Survey Results (2025)

Although 70% of respondents assessed the selection process as generally transparent, qualitative findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveal a more complex reality. Respondents consistently noted that critical information—such as the weighting of assessment components, individual interview scores, and the substantive rationale underlying the final appointment of selected candidates—was not publicly disclosed. This lack of openness was particularly evident at the final decision-making stage, where outcomes were announced without sufficient explanation or supporting documentation.

Moreover, the study found that formal feedback mechanisms for unsuccessful candidates were largely absent. Participants who did not pass the selection process reported receiving little to no information regarding their performance, weaknesses, or areas for improvement. The absence of structured feedback not only limits opportunities for professional development but also reinforces perceptions that the selection process is elitist and closed. In this context, transparency is perceived as procedural rather than substantive—adequate at the initial stages but insufficient in ensuring accountability and fairness in final outcomes.

From a governance perspective, these findings suggest that transparency in the selection of school principals has not yet been fully institutionalized. While procedural openness may contribute to administrative legitimacy, the lack of result transparency and accountability mechanisms undermines trust among education professionals and stakeholders. Without clear disclosure of evaluation criteria, scoring results, and decision rationales, the merit-based framework risks being perceived as symbolic rather than genuinely enforceable. Consequently, strengthening transparency at the outcome level—particularly through public disclosure and systematic feedback—is essential to enhancing both accountability and

confidence in the integrity of the merit-based selection process.

3.5. Institutional Capacity Gaps

Beyond political factors, this study also identifies significant structural constraints related to limited institutional capacity that hinder the effective implementation of the merit system in the appointment of school principals. One of the most prominent challenges concerns the inadequate integration of personnel information systems between the Regional Personnel and Human Resources Development Agency (BKPSDM) and the Education Office.

Although both institutions are formally responsible for managing different aspects of human resource administration, their data systems operate largely in silos. As a result, information related to candidates' performance appraisals, career trajectories, disciplinary records, and professional development histories is often fragmented, outdated, or inconsistent across institutions (Sary *et al.*, 2024; Setyowati, 2016b).

This lack of system integration has direct implications for the credibility and accuracy of candidate assessments. In several cases, discrepancies were found between performance records held by the Education Office and those maintained by BKPSDM, complicating efforts to conduct objective and evidence-based evaluations. Consequently, verification of candidates' performance track records tends to rely on incomplete documentation or subjective judgments rather than comprehensive, data-driven assessments. This condition weakens one of the core pillars of the merit system, namely the use of reliable performance data as the basis for promotion and appointment decisions.

In addition to information system constraints, the study reveals limitations in the capacity of assessment mechanisms, particularly with regard to

the availability and competence of assessors. The number of certified or adequately trained assessors at the local level remains limited, resulting in a heavy workload for existing assessors and reducing the depth and rigor of the evaluation process (Haider, 2019; Suryawan et al., 2025).

As a consequence, managerial leadership assessments often prioritize compliance with formal administrative requirements—such as completion of documents and attendance in competency tests—over a substantive evaluation of leadership capacity, strategic thinking, instructional leadership, and problem-solving skills.

Interview findings suggest that leadership assessments are frequently reduced to standardized checklists or short interviews that are insufficient to capture the complex competencies required of effective school principals. Aspects such as the ability to lead pedagogical innovation, manage organizational change, foster teacher development, and engage stakeholders are rarely assessed in a systematic and meaningful manner (Setyowati, 2016b; Sudrajat, 2023). This procedural approach to assessment reinforces the perception that the merit system functions primarily as an administrative formality rather than as a robust mechanism for identifying high-quality educational leaders.

From an institutional perspective, these capacity gaps indicate that the implementation of the merit system is constrained not only by political intervention but also by organizational readiness and resource limitations (Sauer & Gabbi, 2018; Spohr et al., 2017). The absence of integrated human resource databases, combined with weak assessment infrastructure, undermines the ability of local governments to operationalize meritocratic principles in a consistent and credible manner. In line with public administration literature, this finding underscores that regulatory frameworks alone are insufficient to ensure effective merit system implementation; they must be supported by adequate institutional capacity, professional human resource management systems, and continuous investment in assessor training.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of documents and research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation

of the merit system in the appointment of school principals in Bener Meriah Regency continues to face a significant gap between the regulatory framework and its practical implementation in the field. Although the local government has established a legal foundation supporting the application of the merit system, including Regent Regulation Number 37 of 2020, its implementation has not fully reflected the principles of objectivity and professionalism in the selection process.

The phenomenon of meritocratic distortion remains evident, in which selection mechanisms and competency assessments frequently function merely as administrative formalities, while final appointment decisions are often influenced by local political interests and informal networks. Political intervention also remains prominent, as indicated by approximately 60% of respondents who acknowledged moderate to high levels of political interference in the appointment process, with informal factors such as political loyalty, status as a local native, and personal proximity to political elites often outweighing candidates' professional achievements. Furthermore, transparency in the selection process tends to be partial, with relative openness observed at the initial registration stage but declining significantly during the announcement of results and final appointment decisions.

The absence of written justifications or feedback for unsuccessful candidates further reinforces perceptions of unfairness. The implementation of the merit system is also constrained by limited institutional capacity, particularly due to the lack of integration between personnel information systems managed by BKPSDM and the Education Office, as well as the limited number and competency of certified assessors at the regional level.

These conditions not only undermine the credibility of the regional bureaucracy but also risk systematically lowering the quality of education, as principal positions are not always filled by the most competent instructional leaders. Therefore, strong political commitment from regional leaders, strengthened institutional capacity, and the development of independent oversight mechanisms are essential to ensure that the appointment of school principals is conducted in a professional, transparent, and politically independent manner.

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