

A Comparative Analysis of Civil Servant Recruitment Policy in Timor-Leste and Indonesia

Antonio Sousa de Jesus
Ministry of State Administration, Timor-Leste
[email : antonio@gmail.com](mailto:antonio@gmail.com)

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of civil servant (Funcionário Público) recruitment and placement policy implementation in Timor-Leste, identifying institutional strengths and challenges in adopting a competency-based system. As a country that gained independence in 2002, Timor-Leste is in the process of building a more professional and accountable bureaucratic system. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative method, comparing civil service recruitment policy frameworks between Timor-Leste and Indonesia as a reference for bureaucratic reform in Southeast Asia. Data were collected through policy document review, systematic literature analysis of Scopus-indexed articles, and regulatory examination. The findings indicate that Timor-Leste's civil service system is supported by an adequate constitutional foundation under the 2002 RDTL Constitution. However, a number of implementation challenges persist, including recruitment practices not yet fully grounded in competency-based principles, weak independent oversight mechanisms, and the influence of political considerations in certain appointments. These conditions reflect transitional dynamics commonly observed in post-conflict states that are still consolidating their public institutions. This study recommends strengthening the merit system regulatory framework, building the capacity of independent oversight institutions, and sustaining competency development programs as strategic steps toward more effective and public-oriented governance.

Keywords: civil state apparatus; merit system; new public management; public policy implementation; Timor-Leste

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika implementasi kebijakan rekrutmen dan penempatan Funcionário Público (aparatur sipil negara) di Timor-Leste dengan mengidentifikasi kekuatan kelembagaan serta tantangan yang dihadapi dalam penerapan sistem berbasis kompetensi. Sebagai negara yang baru memperoleh kemerdekaannya sejak tahun 2002, Timor-Leste tengah dalam proses membangun sistem birokrasi yang lebih profesional dan akuntabel. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode komparatif, membandingkan kerangka kebijakan rekrutmen aparatur sipil negara antara Timor-Leste dan Indonesia sebagai referensi reformasi birokrasi di kawasan Asia Tenggara. Data dikumpulkan melalui telaah dokumen kebijakan, kajian literatur sistematis terhadap artikel terindeks Scopus, serta analisis regulasi yang berlaku. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sistem aparatur sipil negara Timor-Leste didukung oleh landasan konstitusional yang memadai berdasarkan Konstitusi RDTL Tahun 2002. Namun, terdapat sejumlah tantangan dalam implementasi, di antaranya kecenderungan rekrutmen yang belum sepenuhnya berbasis kompetensi, lemahnya mekanisme pengawasan independen, serta pengaruh pertimbangan politik dalam pengisian jabatan tertentu. Kondisi ini merefleksikan tahapan transisi yang lazim dijumpai pada negara-negara pasca konflik yang sedang mengkonsolidasikan kelembagaan publiknya. Penelitian ini menyarankan penguatan kerangka regulasi sistem merit, pembangunan kapasitas lembaga pengawas independen, serta pengembangan kompetensi aparatur secara berkelanjutan sebagai langkah strategis menuju tata kelola pemerintahan yang lebih efektif dan berorientasi publik.

Kata Kunci: aparatur sipil negara; implementasi kebijakan publik; meritokrasi; rekrutmen birokrasi; Timor-Leste

Introduction

Timor-Leste, as a nation established through the process of independence under the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) of 2002, faces complex challenges in building an effective and responsive system of governance. The country adopts a semi presidential system of government with the separation of powers divided into four main pillars: the President of the Republic, the National Parliament, the Government (Executive), and the Judiciary. Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the RDTL Constitution affirms that Timor-Leste is a democratic, sovereign, independent, and unified state founded upon the will of the people and respect for human dignity.

In the context of state institution-building for a relatively young nation, the recruitment and placement of *Funcionário Público* (civil servants) constitutes one of the most critical policy instruments determining the quality of governance. Dye (1992) defines public policy as whatever governments choose to do or not to do, reflecting the choices and priorities of those in authority. Within this framework, civil servant recruitment policy is not merely an administrative personnel matter, but rather a reflection of the government's commitment to professionalism and the quality of public services.

Empirical studies in the field of public sector management have consistently demonstrated a relationship between competency based recruitment practices and bureaucratic effectiveness. Oliveira, Perry, and Motta (2024), through a systematic review of 96 empirical articles covering the period 1991-2022, found strong support for various theories explaining the positive relationship between meritocratic practices and governmental performance. Furthermore, Meyer Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster (2021), in their comparative study, affirmed that competency based civil service management systems are correlated with lower levels of corruption and improved public service quality. These findings are highly relevant when reflecting upon the current institutional consolidation phase of Timor-Leste.

Studies on recruitment dynamics in developing and post-conflict countries suggest that the transition toward merit-based systems does not occur in a linear fashion. Duong (2021), in his study of civil servant recruitment in Vietnam, found that newly democratic countries tend to face tensions between the need for technical competence, on one hand, and the dynamics of political affiliation and personal relationships, on the other. This represents a structural challenge commonly encountered by many Southeast Asian countries in the process of modernizing their bureaucracies.

Meanwhile, Fernandez and Cheema (2025), through a longitudinal study of African countries, found empirical evidence that merit based appointments and the strengthening of bureaucratic autonomy significantly enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery, even in post conflict contexts similar to that of Timor-Leste. These findings underscore the importance of reforming the recruitment system as a foundation for enhancing state capacity.

Against this background, this study aims to: identify the institutional strengths and implementation challenges of civil servant recruitment policy in Timor-Leste; analyze the factors influencing the application of a competency based system in the

Timorese bureaucracy; and formulate policy recommendations oriented toward strengthening civil servant professionalism, drawing on Indonesia's experience of bureaucratic reform as a regional comparison.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative study design. The qualitative approach was selected because this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of civil servant recruitment policy implementation in Timor-Leste within its complex and evolving political context. The comparative design is used to compare the civil servant recruitment policy frameworks of Timor-Leste and Indonesia as representatives of developing countries in Southeast Asia that have undergone a longer trajectory of bureaucratic reform.

Data collection was carried out through three primary strategies. First, a review of policy documents encompassing the 2002 RDTL Constitution, civil service related regulations in Timor-Leste, and the legal framework of bureaucratic reform in Indonesia, including Law No. 20 of 2023 on the State Civil Apparatus. Second, a systematic literature review of scientific articles indexed in Scopus and other leading international databases, with a particular focus on merit systems, civil service management in developing countries, and public policy implementation within the period of 2020-2025. Third, a comparative analysis of the civil servant recruitment regulations and policy frameworks in both countries to identify gaps and opportunities for policy learning.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis of relevant policy documents and literature, as well as comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences between the civil servant recruitment systems of Timor-Leste and Indonesia. The analytical framework adopted refers to Edwards III's (2010) policy implementation model, which encompasses four dimensions communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure to map the actual conditions of recruitment policy implementation in the field.

Results and Discussion

Policy Foundations and Institutional Strengths of Civil Servant Recruitment in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste possesses a constitutional foundation that formally affirms the principles of a democratic rule of law. The 2002 RDTL Constitution serves as the highest legal foundation governing all aspects of governance, including the management of state civil servants. Article 137 of the RDTL Constitution explicitly mandates that public administration shall be oriented toward the public interest, respect the legitimate rights and interests of citizens, and be structured to prevent excessive bureaucracy. This constitutional mandate represents a significant normative strength as a basis for developing a professional civil service system.

Brewer, Kellough, and Rainey (2022), in their study on public administration values in the United States federal civil service system, affirm that bureaucratic

effectiveness is highly dependent on the consistent application of core administrative values, particularly competence, integrity, and accountability. Although the contexts of the two countries differ, this normative argument is relevant in assessing Timor-Leste's position: the availability of a strong constitutional foundation constitutes an important institutional asset, even though the gap between norms and practice still needs to be bridged through the strengthening of derivative regulations and implementation mechanisms.

Oliveira, Perry, and Motta (2024), through a systematic review of three decades of empirical evidence, found a consistent relationship between merit-based recruitment principles and improvements in governmental performance. This finding confirms that the existence of a pro-merit normative foundation as embodied in the RDTL Constitution is a prerequisite that must be continuously reinforced through concrete and operationally implementable policies. In 2026, the Timorese government has been striving to make recruitment more meritocratic and non-partisan; the President emphasized the importance of digitalization, merit-based examinations, transparency, professionalism, and civil servant management free from partisan political interests (Camilio de Sousa, 2026).

Implementation Challenges: Recruitment, Competency, and Political Influence

In practice, the recruitment of civil servants in Timor-Leste faces a number of interrelated challenges. Research conducted by Sipa (2021) in the Education Secretariat of the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse identified three primary issues in the recruitment process: non-compliance with administrative requirements, selection processes that do not meet established standards, and the influence of non-technical considerations in recruitment decisions. Although these findings are local in scope, they provide an indication of systemic implementation challenges that require a comprehensive policy response.

Duong (2021), in his study of civil servant recruitment in Vietnam, provides a relevant comparative perspective: countries undergoing democratic consolidation frequently encounter tensions between the need for technical competence, on one side, and the dynamics of affiliation considerations and personal relationships, on the other. This is not a unique weakness of Timor-Leste, but rather a structural challenge commonly found in Southeast Asian countries during phases of institutional transition. Therefore, analysis of this condition should be situated within the framework of an ongoing transition, rather than solely as an assessment of governmental capacity or commitment. The Timorese government and the Civil Service Commission are currently implementing a Human Resource Management Reform Plan for the public sector covering 2023-2028, including a staffing diagnosis, revision of career regulations, and promotion of civil servants (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025).

Furthermore, Moynihan (2025), in his study on contemporary bureaucratic politicization, warns that the expansion of political considerations in filling bureaucratic positions which he terms "the new politicization" can undermine state capacity over the long term. He identifies two key mechanisms that need to be anticipated: the replacement of competent officials with individuals more oriented toward loyalty, and the demoralization of professional civil servants who feel that

competence is not proportionately valued. These observations are relevant as reflective material for Timor-Leste in designing a more accountable civil service management architecture.

Research by Veit, Fromm, and Ebinger (2024) on civil service politicization in Germany a more institutionally established context demonstrates that measuring politicization requires more than a formal perspective; it is also necessary to consider career trajectories, professional background, and patterns of position rotation. This perspective highlights the importance of developing a comprehensive civil service information management system in Timor-Leste as an evidence-based monitoring instrument.

The discourse on the separation between the political and administrative domains has long been a central issue in public administration. Wilson (in Hughes, 1994) argued that the administrative realm must be neutral and professional, independent of changes in political power. In the context of Timor-Leste, the effort to achieve this separation is a process that is still ongoing, given that the public administrative institutions are relatively new and still in the process of capacity-building.

From the perspective of the evolution of public administration paradigms, there exists a spectrum of paradigms describing the evolution of governance: from Old Public Administration (OPA), characterized by formal hierarchy and procedural orientation; to New Public Management (NPM), which emphasizes efficiency and outcome orientation; to New Public Service (NPS), which places democratic values and citizen interests at the center of governance. Understanding Timor-Leste's position means viewing it as a country in transition not as a state stagnant within any single paradigm with elements from all three paradigms potentially present simultaneously in practice.

The Timorese government, through the Civil Service Commission, has launched a reform plan to improve human resource management in the public sector, with the objective of creating a more efficient and performance-based system. In addition, budget management also plays an important role, with efforts to reduce government expenditure, including through a recruitment freeze for new civil servants and pension reform. Government efforts to implement a merit system in a more transparent manner can enhance a sense of fairness among prospective civil servants and strengthen the legitimacy of the selection process. In this context, the government faces a significant challenge: how to maintain a balance between the need to improve a more efficient public administration system while guaranteeing equal opportunities for applicants, free from the influence of external factors such as politics or social connections (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025).

Fernandez and Cheema (2025), through a longitudinal study of African countries, found that strengthening bureaucratic autonomy and merit-based appointments significantly contribute to improvements in public service effectiveness, even in fragile institutional conditions. This finding provides an empirical basis demonstrating that investment in strengthening the merit system is not merely normative, but also has measurable practical impacts. For Timor-Leste,

this study offers a vision of what can be achieved through consistent and gradual reform.

Comparison with Indonesia: Lessons from Bureaucratic Reform

A comparison between Timor-Leste and Indonesia in terms of civil servant recruitment and management provides a useful perspective on the trajectory of bureaucratic reform in the region. Indonesia possesses a more comprehensive legal framework, beginning with Law No. 5 of 2014 on the State Civil Apparatus, subsequently updated by Law No. 20 of 2023, which firmly mandates the application of the merit system across all aspects of civil servant management. Moreover, the existence of the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN) as an independent oversight body constitutes an institutional mechanism that plays a role in maintaining the integrity of the recruitment system, despite facing various limitations in practice.

Meanwhile, Timor-Leste has also developed its own institutional framework through the establishment of the Komisaun Funsau Públika (KFP) known in Portuguese as the Comissão da Função Pública (CFP) the official body responsible for managing all civil servant recruitment processes in Timor-Leste. This institution was established under Law No. 7 of 2009 as an independent state institution, with the primary responsibility of ensuring a civil service that is politically neutral, merit-based, and maintains high standards of professionalism in serving the state and the people of Timor-Leste (Governu Timor-Leste, 2015). The independent nature of the KFP is reflected in the fact that it does not accept political intervention or instructions from any party; rather, it operates based on the principles of impartiality and merit, so that the recruitment process evaluates only the competence and skills of candidates without considering group origin or party affiliation (Governu Timor-Leste, 2011).

The presence of the KFP in Timor-Leste and KASN in Indonesia is consistent with the argument by Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster (2021), who affirm that the existence of independent oversight bodies is a crucial factor in protecting the integrity of civil service management systems from political pressures. The Indonesian experience shows that the establishment of such an institution, while not immediately resolving all problems, at least creates a more structured accountability mechanism compared to the absence of an independent oversight body. This is particularly relevant for Timor-Leste, which is still in the process of consolidating the role of the KFP as a guardian of the merit system.

Beyond the institutional dimension, reform challenges also emerge in the area of civil service information management system integration. The KFP is currently developing a digital E-Recruitment system designed to be inclusive for all citizens, including persons with disabilities (Tatoli, 2026b). This initiative demonstrates a commitment to digitalization; however, it remains at an early stage compared to Indonesia's nationally synchronized civil servant management information system. A study conducted by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation covering the period 2023–2025 noted that the administrative capacity of the Timorese government remains inadequate, primarily due to the limited capacity of ministries in formulating

operational plans and the ineffectiveness of civil servant performance evaluation systems (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2025).

Ultimately, the dimension of visionary leadership and dynamic governance in Timor-Leste faces structural challenges specific to a post-conflict nation. Human resource management reform in public administration has been articulated in the *Planu Reforma Jestaun Rekursus Umanus Administrasaun Públika* for the period 2023–2028, with 2025 priorities encompassing the revision of the career system, redefinition of training and capacity development, and adjustments to the remuneration scheme (Governu Timor-Leste, 2025). Although the policy direction is aligned with the principles identified by Rintaka et al. (2024), implementation demands long-term political commitment that is consistent across constitutional governments. Thus, reflection on Indonesia's experience provides a relevant analytical framework, while simultaneously affirming that Timor-Leste's reform strategy must account for the fiscal, demographic, and institutional capacity constraints inherent to its national context.

In this regard, this comparison is not intended as a hierarchical assessment, but rather as policy learning that acknowledges the differences in historical, institutional, and capacity contexts between the two countries. Timor-Leste has a unique context of its own—including a long colonial legacy, a dynamic process of independence, and a resource capacity that is still being built all of which must serve as primary considerations in any reform recommendation.

Factors Influencing the Implementation of Civil Servant Recruitment Policy

Edwards III (2010) identifies four dimensions that influence the success of public policy implementation: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. In the context of civil servant recruitment in Timor-Leste, all four dimensions face interrelated challenges that require a comprehensive policy response.

From the communication dimension, competency standards and recruitment procedures have not been communicated consistently across all levels of the bureaucracy, resulting in varying levels of understanding regarding selection requirements and procedures among government units. From the resource dimension, budgetary constraints and limited technical capacity in civil service human resource management constitute obstacles that need to be addressed gradually through planned investment.

From the disposition dimension, there are differing value orientations among bureaucratic stakeholders: some are already oriented toward competency-based professionalism, while others remain influenced by personal relationships and non-technical considerations. This condition is characteristic of institutional transition and requires a sustained approach to building organizational culture. From the bureaucratic structure dimension, strengthening oversight institutions that have adequate authority, capacity, and independence constitutes an urgent priority.

Fernandez and Cheema (2025) emphasize that effective bureaucratic reform requires changes that encompass all four dimensions simultaneously, rather than a partial approach that only addresses formal regulatory aspects. This recommendation is consistent with the perspective of Moynihan (2025), who

stresses the importance of building sustained state capacity as the foundation for a responsive and accountable bureaucracy.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the implementation of civil servant recruitment and placement policy in Timor-Leste is in a phase of institutional transition that requires systematic and sustained strengthening. On one hand, Timor-Leste's civil service system possesses normative strengths in the form of an adequate constitutional foundation and the existence of formal regulations concerning state civil servants. On the other hand, a number of implementation challenges need to be addressed constructively, including the suboptimal application of competency-based selection, limited independent oversight mechanisms, and the influence of non-technical considerations in the recruitment process at certain levels.

This condition reflects dynamics commonly observed in countries undergoing post-independence institutional consolidation—not as a failed process, but as a structural challenge that can be overcome through well-planned policies and consistent support. The comparison with Indonesia demonstrates that strengthening the merit system, supported by independent oversight bodies, represents one approach worthy of consideration, while remaining attentive to the specific context of Timor-Leste.

This study recommends three strategic steps that may be considered by the Timorese government. First, strengthening the regulatory framework for the merit system, equipped with clear and operationalizable accountability mechanisms. Second, building the capacity of independent civil servant management oversight institutions with adequate authority and protection from particular-interest pressures. Third, long-term investment in civil servant competency development through a structured, needs-based training system oriented toward improving the quality of public services. These three steps need to be implemented in a synergistic and adaptive manner, responsive to the evolving institutional context of Timor-Leste.

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