

## Organizational Culture and HR Management in Public Sector: Social Exchange Mechanisms in the Merit System for Senior Official Selection in Riau Provincial Government

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Merit System;  
Organizational  
Culture; Social  
Exchange; HR  
Management; Riau;  
Patronage; Islamic  
Governance;

**Background:** Organizational culture and HR management in public bureaucracy face a structural paradox when formal merit systems operate alongside deeply embedded socio-cultural norms. Riau Province's Civil Service Merit Index rose from 227.5 (2019) to 325.5 (2024), yet the "Promotion & Mutation" sub-component—the direct measure of appointment integrity—scored only 37.5% in the critical 2020 mass selection year. Simultaneously, 54.2% of appointments went to candidates ranked 2nd or 3rd rather than to the highest-scorer, signaling systematic non-merit intervention.

**Method:** Qualitative case study design (Yin, 2022) examining the 2020 open selection of 24 Senior Civil Service (JPT Pratama) positions in Riau Provincial Government. Data from in-depth interviews (n=17 key informants), participant observation (8 months), and document analysis were analyzed through a thematic-dialectical procedure framed within social exchange theory (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Molm, 2003), Ekeh's Two Publics (1974), and Riau Malay organizational culture (Effendy, 2013).

**Results:** Three simultaneous exchange layers structure the HR appointment process: (1) an administrative layer where competency scores are exchanged for procedural legitimacy; (2) a substantive back-stage layer in the governor's discretionary space where political loyalty displaces merit as the decisive currency; and (3) a cultural legitimation layer where Malay values of *Berbalas Budi* (reciprocal kindness), *Amanah* (trust), and *Marwah* (dignity/honor) are strategically renarrated as moral cover (*Selubung Moral*) to normalize patronage.

**Conclusion:** The study proposes a Culturally Contextualized Social Exchange Model (CCSEM) a Hybrid Bureaucracy Framework wherein formal merit functions as institutional legitimacy scaffolding, patronage serves as the substantive appointment driver, and local culture acts as the moral adhesive sustaining this hybrid equilibrium. This contributes novel theoretical ground to organizational sociology and Islamic corporate governance, calling for reforms that reclaim authentic Islamic-Malay values against their appropriated, patronage-justifying distortions.

Received: 4/18/2026

Revised: 5/23/2026

Accepted: 5/28/2026

#### How to cite this article:

Ridwan, I., Sukmana, O., Susilo, R.K.D., Junaidi. (2026). Organizational Culture and HR Management in Public Sector: Social Exchange Mechanisms in the Merit System for Senior Official Selection in Riau Provincial Government. *Sharia Economic and Management Business Journal (SEMBJ)*, 7(2), 240-250. <https://doi.org/10.62159/sembj.v7i2.2233>

## INTRODUCTION

Human resource management (HRM) in public sector organizations is globally premised on Weber's (1947) foundational ideal of bureaucratic rationality: appointments based on qualification, competence, and performance governed by rules, not by personal favors. Young's (1958) meritocracy formula intelligence plus effort equals merit codified this ideal into policy architecture. In Indonesia, Law No. 5 of 2014 (revised as Law No. 20/2023) on the State Civil Apparatus (ASN) formally institutionalized the merit system as the cornerstone of bureaucratic governance, mandating selection free from political, ethnic, or relational considerations. Within the organizational culture literature, Schein (2010) establishes that deep cultural assumptions fundamentally shape organizational behavior, while Cameron and Quinn (2011) demonstrate that HR management effectiveness is contingent on cultural alignment. In the Riau provincial context, Effendy's (2013) canonical work on

Tunjuk Ajar Melayu documents how indigenous Riau Malay values Amanah (trustworthiness), Marwah (honor), and Berbalas Budi (reciprocal kindness) constitute an ethical leadership framework that, in its authentic form, converges with merit principles: both demand that public positions be entrusted only to the most capable and morally upright.

Despite this normative convergence, empirical evidence reveals a persistent and unexplained gap. Malik and Prasojo (2023) document "institutional isomorphism": local governments adopt the external structure of merit selection forming selection committees, conducting competency assessments while substantive decisions remain governed by political loyalty and patronage networks. Bukti (2023) found in Makassar that assessment scores are systematically demoted to supplementary documentation, while Wijaya et al. (2019) demonstrated in Palembang that kinship ties and electoral support histories carry far greater decisional weight than managerial competency scores. Critically, existing scholarship explains what goes wrong but offers limited understanding of why the same officials who publicly advocate merit reform simultaneously undermine it without experiencing moral contradiction. What cultural mechanism allows actors to perceive patronage appointments as ethically legitimate rather than as violations?

Recent scholarship is reconfiguring the frame. Toral (2024) provides a landmark contribution demonstrating that politically-connected appointments in developing-state bureaucracies are not invariably dysfunctional: they reduce information asymmetry and build trust-based compliance that technocratic selection cannot guarantee. Ekeh's (1974) Two Publics theory explains that post-colonial bureaucrats navigate two simultaneous moral universes the civic public (governed by state law) and the primordial public (governed by communal obligation and kinship reciprocity). Polese (2023) reconceptualizes informality as "the art of bypassing the state": a rational adaptive strategy, not mere corruption. Yet none of these frameworks fully accounts for the specific mechanism by which cultural narratives actively transform patronage into morally legitimate conduct leaving a critical theoretical gap.

This study fills that gap by proposing a Culturally Contextualized Social Exchange Model (CCSEM) a three-layer Hybrid Bureaucracy Framework grounded in the 2020 mass selection of 24 JPT Pratama positions in Riau Provincial Government. The novelty lies in demonstrating empirically and theoretically that organizational culture does not merely obstruct or enable merit; it functions as a moral adhesive that allows formally contradictory systems merit and patronage to coexist stably in a hybrid equilibrium. This contribution extends Islamic corporate governance literature by revealing how Sharia-rooted Malay cultural values (Amanah, Marwah) are simultaneously preserved in normative rhetoric and appropriated to justify patronage demanding reforms that reclaim authentic Islamic values against their distorted applications.

Research Questions: 1) How is the merit system implemented in JPT Pratama selection in Riau Provincial Government? 2) How do social exchange mechanisms operate among actors within the merit system, and what role does organizational culture play in legitimizing these mechanisms?

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2022), suited for investigating contemporary phenomena how and why social exchange operates within bureaucratic selection in their real-life organizational context. The case unit is the 2020 open selection of 24 JPT Pratama positions in Riau Provincial Government, chosen as the largest single selection cycle (121 applicants, 24 positions)

coinciding with a newly-elected governor's political consolidation period, creating maximum observable tension between formal merit procedures and informal political pressures (see Figure 2).

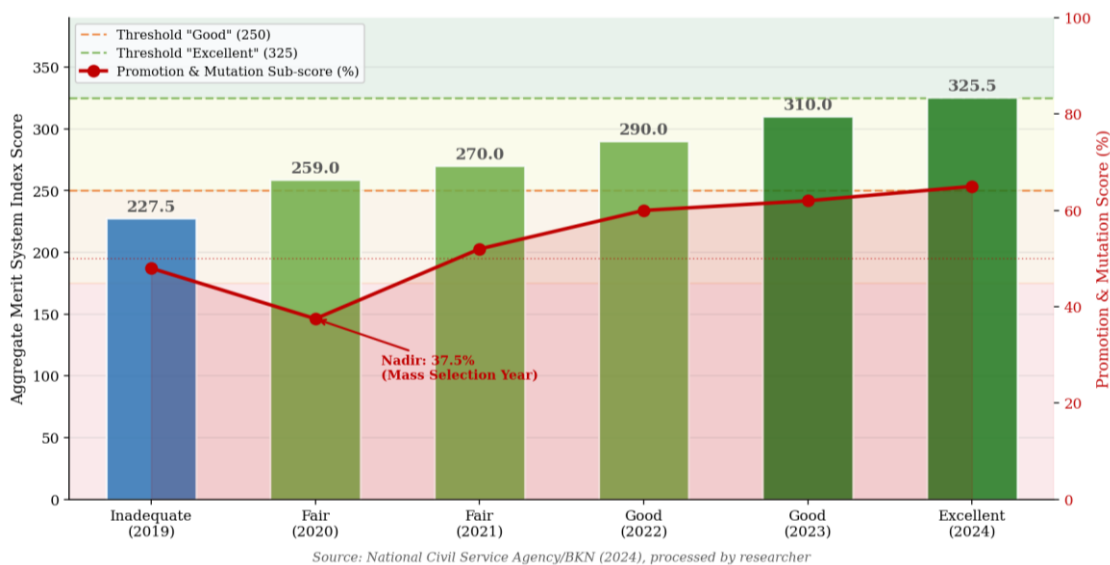
Data were collected through three triangulated methods. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 key informants: 6 former selection committee (Pansel) members; 4 officials appointed through the 2020 selection; 3 applicants who achieved highest assessment scores but were not appointed; 2 senior career civil servants; and 2 Riau Malay cultural institution representatives. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation covered formal selection events and informal bureaucratic gatherings (8 months, November 2024–June 2025), generating 94 pages of field notes. Document analysis encompassed selection committee reports, assessment score matrices, BKN Merit Index reports (2019–2024), and regional planning documents.

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2019) thematic-dialectical procedure: (1) open coding; (2) axial coding linking categories across cases; (3) selective coding building theoretical propositions; and (4) dialectical synthesis mapping findings against a Hegelian Thesis–Antithesis–Synthesis framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through member-checking (5 informants), extended field engagement, and inter-rater reliability review ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Core Paradox: Merit Index Growth Alongside Appointment Integrity Decline

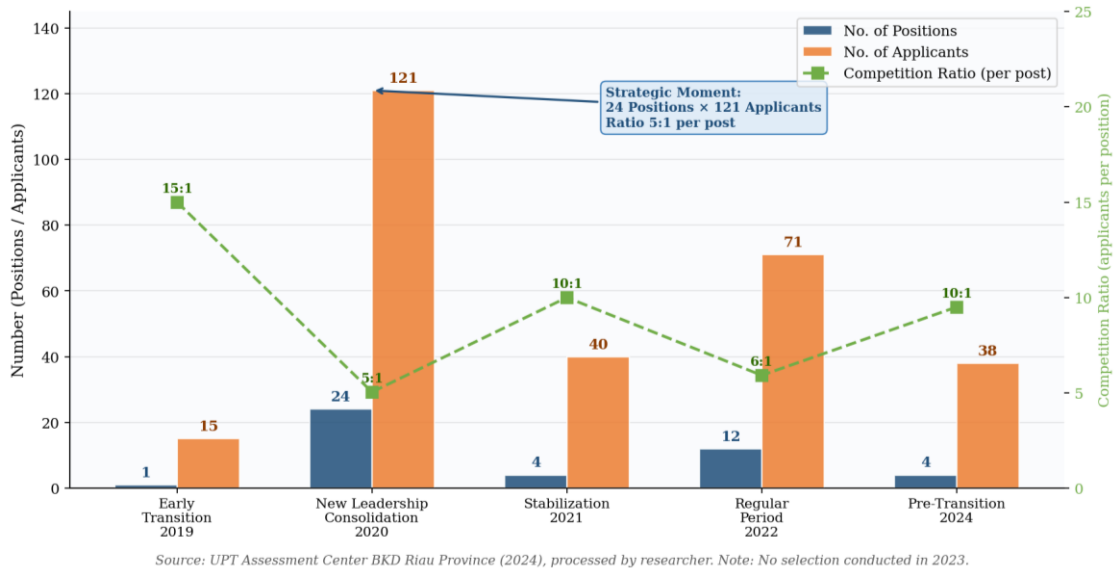
The most revealing empirical entry point is a quantitative paradox embedded in Riau's civil service data. As shown in Figure 1, the aggregate Merit System Index rose dramatically from 227.5 (status: "Inadequate") in 2019 to 325.5 ("Excellent") in 2024—a 43.3% increase over five years. On the surface, this trajectory signals remarkable governance progress. However, disaggregating the index reveals a structural anomaly: the "Promotion and Mutation" sub-component—which directly governs appointment decisions—consistently scored the lowest of all merit dimensions across every cycle examined. In 2020, the year of Riau's largest selection cycle, it reached its nadir at only 37.5%.



**Figure 1. Civil Service Merit System Index, Riau Province 2019–2024 and Promotion & Mutation Sub-Score Trajectory (Source: BKN, 2024, processed by researcher)**

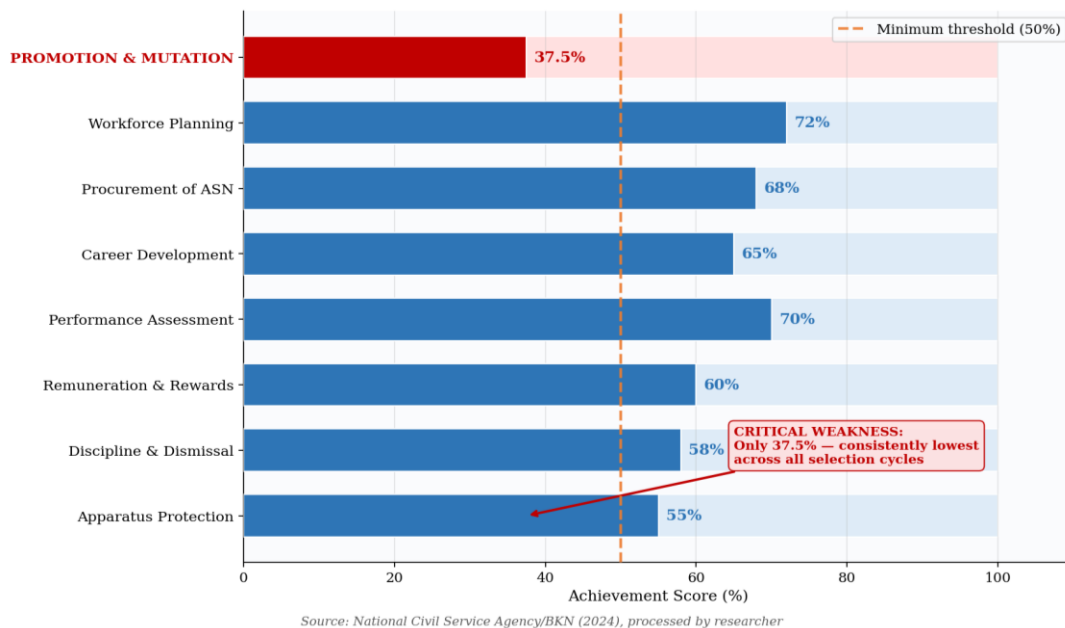
This divergence—aggregate index climbing while the appointment integrity sub-component stagnates—precisely what Malik and Prasojo (2023) term institutional isomorphism: the formal architecture of merit is constructed and maintained for external legitimacy purposes, while the substantive decision-making core operates according to a different logic entirely. Riggs' (1964) prismatic society theory is instructive: Riau has the structural hallmarks of a modern meritocracy—assessment centers, selection committees, documented procedures—while its underlying decision culture retains features of traditional patron-client governance. This duality is not accidental; it is functionally maintained by actors who benefit from both layers.

Figure 2 contextualizes the critical importance of the 2020 selection cycle. With 24 positions contested by 121 applicants (a competition ratio of 5:1), and occurring during the immediate post-election consolidation of Governor Syamsuar's new administration, this cycle represents the highest-stakes arena for the merit–patronage tension. The concentration of appointments in this politically consequential moment provides the study's key analytical leverage.



**Figure 2. Open Selection of JPT Pratama, Riau Province 2019–2024: Positions, Applicants, and Competition Ratio (Source: BKD Riau Province, 2024, processed by researcher)**

Figure 3 exposes the internal anatomy of the 2020 merit failure. While workforce planning (72%), procurement (68%), and performance assessment (70%) all surpassed the minimum threshold, the "Promotion & Mutation" component collapsed to 37.5%—12.5 percentage points below the minimum performance threshold of 50%. This is not a random fluctuation. Cross-year analysis confirms that the Promotion & Mutation sub-score is the most volatile and consistently the weakest dimension, with the largest gaps appearing precisely in election-adjacent years (2019, 2020). This pattern confirms that the appointment decision process—not the administrative machinery around it—is the epicenter of merit system deviation in Riau.



**Figure 3. Merit System Component Achievement, Riau Province 2020 (Year of Largest Selection Cycle) (Source: BKN, 2024, processed by researcher)**

The most consequential empirical finding is presented in Figure 4. Of the 24 JPT Pratama appointments made in 2020, 54.2% went to candidates ranked 2nd or 3rd rather than to the highest-scoring candidate from the Pansel process. Under a pure merit system, each of the three shortlisted candidates would have an equal probability of appointment (33.3%). The observed rate of rank-1 appointment at only 45.8% with 54.2% going to lower-ranked candidates constitutes strong statistical evidence of systematic, non-random intervention. The average score gap between the bypassed rank-1 candidate and the appointee was 18.4 assessment points, nearly two standard deviations in the assessment framework. This is not a margin of professional judgment; it is a structural override.

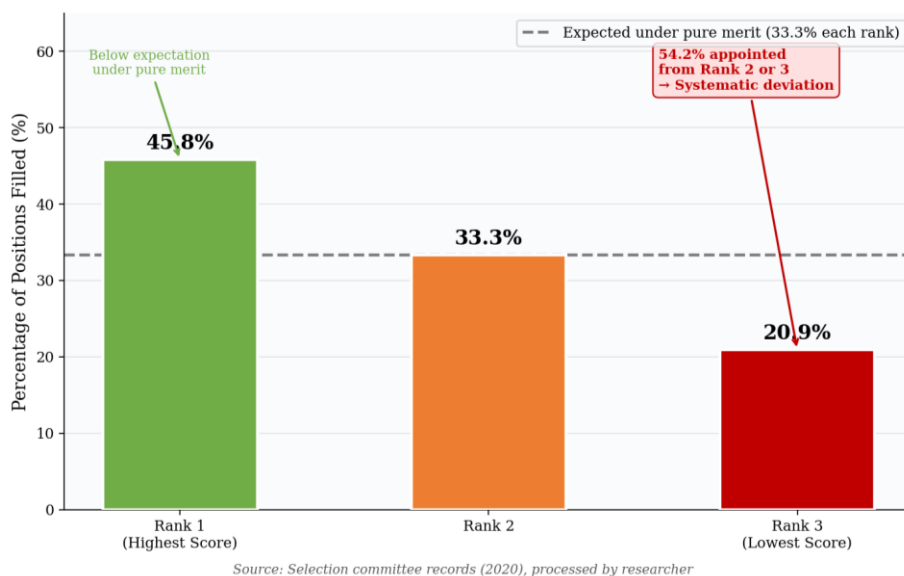


Figure 4. Appointment Outcomes by Candidate Rank, Riau Provincial Government 2020 (n = 24 positions) (Source: Selection committee records, 2020, processed by researcher)

### Layer 1: The Administrative Mechanism as Institutional Legitimacy Scaffolding

The first exchange layer encompasses the entire Pansel (Selection Committee) process: administrative verification, competency assessment via the National Assessment Center, policy paper evaluation, and structured interviews. Field data confirms this layer was conducted with genuine procedural rigor. As one former Pansel member stated (Informant A2):

*"The assessment center used certified external assessors. No one interfered with the scoring process. The Pansel results were legitimate all three names on the shortlist genuinely had the qualifications."*

This procedural integrity is not paradoxical it is structurally functional. Using Blau's (1964) framework, asymmetric power requires legitimacy to remain stable. The Pansel's rigorous process produces the three-candidate shortlist that renders the Governor's final appointment legally unassailable. Permenpan RB No. 15/2019 contains the critical provision that enables this: the Governor is required only to "choose one of three recommended names" not necessarily the highest-ranked. This legal architecture *deliberately* permits bypassing the rank-1 candidate while remaining fully within the law. The formal layer's integrity is thus not a prerequisite for merit-based outcomes; it is the **institutional scaffolding** that legitimizes whatever substantive decision follows.

This is Molm's (2003) *negotiated exchange* in its purest form: terms are openly negotiated (competency assessment criteria), both parties fulfill their obligations (candidates perform, Pansel scores objectively), and the result procedural legitimacy is delivered. But the key insight is that this procedural legitimacy, once secured, exhausts the formal system's authority. The Governor's discretionary space begins precisely where the Pansel's mandate ends.

### Layer 2: The Substantive Mechanism in the Discretionary Space

The decisive exchange occurs in what Thoha (2016) calls bureaucracy's "dark room": the Governor's discretionary authority within the three-name shortlist. Here the *switching mechanism* (Molm, 2003) activates: competency scores lose their decisional weight and are replaced by a new exchange

currency trust, political loyalty, and relational history. A senior career civil servant (Informant B3) described this plainly:

"Everyone in the corridors knows the real selection happened before the formal one. The assessment is for the paperwork. The Governor already knows who he wants before the Pansel even convenes. The committee just needs to ensure that person makes the shortlist."

This *musyawarah pra-lelang* (pre-selection closed deliberation) represents what Helmke and Levitsky (2004) term a *complementary informal institution* arrangement that fills the legal gaps in formal rules while operating parallel to them. The Governor cannot bypass the selection process entirely (KASN oversight enforces this), but can informally ensure the preferred candidate enters the shortlist, then freely choose within it. The informal institution makes the formal one governable from a political standpoint.

Social exchange theory provides the analytical scaffold for this layer's mechanisms. Homans' (1961) *Success Proposition* explains behavioral replication: bureaucrats who demonstrated political loyalty during the gubernatorial campaign were systematically rewarded with appointments. This creates institutional learning: future candidates know the effective exchange currency is political capital, not assessment scores. Emerson's (1976) *Dependence Principle* explains the Governor's absolute decisional power: JPT Pratama positions are monopolized by a single appointing authority with no alternative supply, creating maximum dependence and thus maximum behavioral compliance from aspirants.

Lawler's (2001) Relational Cohesion Theory provides the most nuanced explanation for *chemistry* consistently cited by informants as the primary appointment criterion beyond the Pansel shortlist. Chemistry is not arbitrary subjectivity; it is the crystallized residue of successful reciprocal exchange. A campaign volunteer who protected the Governor's political interests during the election generated repeated positive emotional interactions that cumulated into deep relational trust. This trust Lawler's "relational cohesion" reduces monitoring costs (Toral, 2024) and guarantees policy implementation fidelity in ways no competency test can measure. The exchange in Layer 2: political loyalty + chemistry (bureaucrat) ↔ JPT Pratama appointment + career protection (Governor).

### Layer 3: Cultural Legitimation as Moral Adhesive (Selubung Moral)

The most theoretically original contribution of this study concerns the function of Riau Malay organizational culture in sustaining the hybrid system. The critical analytical distinction is between *authentic cultural values* and their *appropriated form* in bureaucratic practice. Effendy (2013) establishes in *Tunjuk Ajar Melayu* that authentic Malay leadership philosophy *demand*s merit: a leader who appoints unqualified loyalists violates *Amanah* and destroys *Marwah*. Junaidi (2014) confirms through textual hermeneutics that Malay cultural identity fuses governance with Islamic obligation; misuse of authority is not merely administrative failure but theological transgression. In their authentic form, these values are *rem moral* (moral brakes) against patronage, not justifications for it.

The study's central finding is what we term *Selubung Moral* (Moral Veil): the systematic renarration of authentic Malay cultural values to provide moral legitimacy for patronage-based appointments. Three distinct distortion mechanisms were empirically observed:

(1) *Berbalas Budi* distortion. In its authentic form, *Berbalas Budi* is the obligation to reciprocate kindness including the governor's obligation to serve the people who elected him. In its appropriated form, it becomes a debt-collection obligation: campaign supporters acquire a "budi claim" on the governor that must be settled through appointment regardless of administrative qualifications. The governor who declines becomes *kacang lupa kulit* (one who forgets one's roots) a devastating social sanction operating through Ekeh's (1974) primordial public that carries greater behavioral force than any KASN regulatory penalty. As one informant stated (Informant C1, appointed official): "How could the Governor forget us? We were there when no one else was. Giving us positions is just what any leader with character would do."

(2) *Amanah* renarration. Authentic *amanah* demands accountability to the public and to God for correct stewardship. In the distorted form, *amanah* is redefined as singular loyalty to the governor: a "trustworthy" official is one who executes directives without public dissent, keeps confidences, and protects the governor's political interests. Junaidi (2014) correctly notes that Malay Islam frames governance as preparation for the afterlife (*amanah* as preparation for divine accountability) but the study

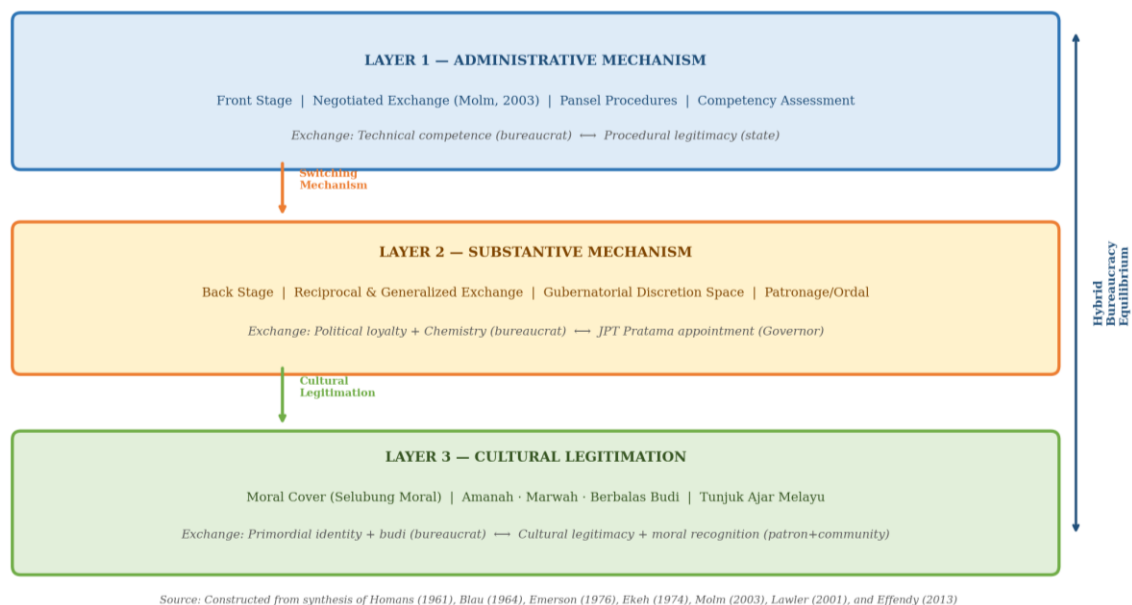
finds this theological weight inverted: bureaucrats who bypass open merit may genuinely believe they fulfill religious obligation by ensuring political stability they frame as a prerequisite for public welfare.

(3) Marwah preservation. Authentic *marwah* requires that a leader maintain institutional honor through merit-based appointment—choosing the most capable protects the dignity of the institution and the people. Appropriated *marwah* becomes identity-protective: appointing "outsiders" (technically superior candidates from outside the loyalist network) threatens the *marwah* of the local Malay political community. The appointment of loyalists is reframed as "protecting local dignity" and "ensuring the sons of the soil govern their own land"—a narrative Jubba et al. (2021) link to the active construction of Malay-Islamic identity politics under Riau's RPJMD 2019–2024 vision of *Mewujudkan Budaya Melayu sebagai Payung Negeri* (Realizing Malay Culture as the Canopy of the Nation).

Together, these three renarrations constitute *Selubung Moral*: the systematic appropriation of authentic Malay cultural vocabulary to provide an internally coherent moral frame in which patronage is the ethical choice—not despite cultural values, but through a particular appropriation of them. This explains the central puzzle: how can officials who publicly advocate merit reform simultaneously practice systematic patronage without cognitive dissonance? The *Selubung Moral* provides them with a cultural narrative in which they are acting correctly—fulfilling obligations of *berbalas budi*, demonstrating *amanah* through loyalty, and protecting *marwah* through insider appointments.

### The Hybrid Bureaucracy Framework: Theoretical Synthesis

Figure 5 presents the full theoretical synthesis: the Culturally Contextualized Social Exchange Model (CCSEM), or Hybrid Bureaucracy Framework. The three layers operate simultaneously and interdependently, producing a stable equilibrium that is adaptive, functionally effective, and culturally self-sustaining.



**Figure 5. Culturally Contextualized Social Exchange Model (Hybrid Bureaucracy Framework)** (Source: Constructed from synthesis of Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Ekeh, 1974; Molm, 2003; Lawler, 2001; Effendy, 2013)

The model advances three theoretical propositions:

Proposition 1 (Formal Layer). The merit system functions as *institutional legitimacy scaffolding*. It is not a failed attempt at genuine meritocracy—it is a deliberately maintained structure providing legal cover, regulatory compliance, and public legitimacy for an appointment process that operates on different substantive criteria. This reconceptualization explains why "institutional isomorphism" (Malik & Prasojo, 2023) is stable and self-reproducing rather than a transitional dysfunction on the path to genuine reform.

Proposition 2 (Substantive Layer). Political patronage functions as the *substantive appointment driver*. The governor's discretionary authority is the rational mechanism for minimizing information asymmetry and agency risk that technocratic assessment cannot resolve (Torral, 2024). Relational trust built through verified histories of successful reciprocal exchange provides a more reliable prediction of administrative responsiveness than competency scores, which reflect hypothetical future behavior rather than proven loyalty under political pressure.

Proposition 3 (Cultural Layer). Riau Malay organizational culture functions as *moral adhesive*. Through the distortion of *Berbalas Budi*, *Amanah*, and *Marwah*, culturally embedded values transform procedurally irregular appointments into culturally legitimate leadership acts. This moral adhesive sustains the hybrid equilibrium by preventing the social fragmentation that would occur if patronage were widely perceived as morally wrong.

**Table 1. Social Exchange Matrix in JPT Pratama Selection, Riau Provincial Government 2020**

Technical Competence	Assessment scores, track record, policy papers	Pansel recommendation (top-3 shortlist entry)	Molm (2003): Negotiated Exchange
Selection Integrity	Accepting any outcome without public protest; discretion about irregularities	Career protection; immunity from arbitrary reassignment	Blau (1964): Legitimation of Power
Political Loyalty	Campaign support, mass mobilization, financial contribution, team sukses membership	JPT Pratama appointment via gubernatorial discretion	Emerson (1976): Dependence Principle
Personal Trust (Chemistry)	Confidentiality, unconditional compliance, pre-selection sowan ritual	"Ordal" (insider) status; direct access to governor inner circle	Lawler (2001): Relational Cohesion
Primordial Identity	Ethnic/regional representation as "Orang Kito" (one of us); shared political identity	Cultural legitimacy as rightful local leader; moral recognition from community	Ekeh (1974): Two Publics; Effendy (2013)

Source: Constructed from synthesis of Homans (1961), Molm (2003), Ekeh (1974), and Effendy (2013)

### Implications for Islamic Corporate Governance and Sharia-Aligned HRM

The SEMBJ readership's core concern the interface between organizational governance and Islamic/Sharia values finds direct application in this study's findings. Islamic Corporate Governance (ICG) scholarship and Islamic HRM literature emphasize the *amanah* (stewardship) principle as the foundation for hiring and promotion: the most competent and morally upright individual must be chosen, free from personal relationship (Al-Qardawi, 2002; Beekun & Badawi, 1999). The Quran explicitly instructs: "*Verily, Allah commands you to make over the trusts to those worthy of them*" (Q. 4:58) a verse consistently cited in Islamic governance literature as the theological basis for merit-based appointment.

The study's findings reveal a critical governance failure: the Islamic value of *amanah* itself is being inverted. Its authentic Quranic command select the most capable for the public good is renarrated as a command to loyalty to the political patron, undermining the very Islamic governance principle it purports to honor. This is not merely an administrative problem; it is a theological one. When public appointments are justified through distorted *amanah* discourse, the sacred weight of Quranic obligation is conscripted to legitimize patron-client networks. Peters and Bianchi (2020) observe that Islamic governance systems theoretically offer a distinctive advantage: *shura* (consultation) and *adalah* (justice) provide internal normative sanctions against patronage that secular legal systems must enforce externally. The Riau case shows this theoretical advantage is being structurally undermined.

A concrete institutional implication follows. The Lembaga Adat Melayu Riau (LAM Riau), as custodian of authentic Riau Malay values, occupies a governance role it has not yet fully activated. LAM Riau could function as a cultural verification authority certifying that values of *Amanah*, *Marwah*, and *Berbalas Budi* are applied in their authentic meaning during selection processes, not in their appropriated,

patronage-justifying distortions. Such an institution would provide what regulatory mechanisms (KASN oversight) alone cannot: a *cultural counter-narrative* that delegitimizes the *Selubung Moral* by restoring the authentic Islamic-Malay governance vocabulary. This represents a novel policy recommendation emerging directly from the study's theoretical contribution.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined social exchange mechanisms and organizational culture's role in HR management and senior civil service selection in Riau Provincial Government, advancing three principal theoretical contributions.

First, the Culturally Contextualized Social Exchange Model (CCSEM) provides a three-layer architecture reconceptualizing the merit–patronage tension as a stable hybrid equilibrium rather than a governance failure awaiting repair. Formal merit operates as institutional legitimacy scaffolding; political patronage as the substantive appointment driver; and local culture as the moral adhesive. This integrates social exchange theory (Homans, Blau, Emerson, Molm, Lawler) with Ekeh's Two Publics and indigenous Riau Malay organizational culture analysis into a theoretically coherent framework.

Second, the concept of *Selubung Moral* (Moral Veil) demonstrates that organizational culture is not a passive backdrop to HRM decisions but an active narrative resource. Through systematic renarration of *Berbalas Budi*, *Amanah*, and *Marwah*, authentic Malay-Islamic values are appropriated to transform procedurally irregular appointments into culturally legitimate acts. This is a governance failure that regulatory reform alone cannot address; it operates at the level of cultural meaning-making, not rule compliance.

Third, for Islamic corporate governance and Sharia-aligned HRM practice, the study issues a critical warning: when authentic Islamic-Malay values are appropriated to legitimize patronage, the normative governance advantage these values could provide is inverted from internal moral constraint to external moral cover. Reforms must reclaim authentic Islamic governance vocabulary—particularly *amanah* as accountability to God and the public, not loyalty to the patron—and should consider institutional roles for Malay cultural authorities (LAM Riau) as cultural verification bodies in appointment governance.

Limitations include the single-province case design (limiting direct generalizability) and retrospective data collection. Future research should examine whether the *Selubung Moral* mechanism operates differently under governors with varying cultural identity orientations, and whether specific KASN regulatory reforms can structurally modify the Layer 2 switching mechanism without the cultural legitimation layer adapting compensatorily.

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