

DOI:10.36758/ijpamr/v6n2.2021/07

DOI: [URL:https://doi.org/10.36758/ijpamr/v6n2.2021/07](https://doi.org/10.36758/ijpamr/v6n2.2021/07)

## **Examining the Challenges of Implementing Merit-based Civil Servant Recruitment in Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

A civil service system is an integral part of all government systems to allow critical interface between the government and its citizens. Many studies on civil service systems have produced findings in the context of Western countries. In this study, we focus on Zimbabwe, a developing country in southern Africa, to examine the reasons why merit-based civil service recruitment is not properly implemented in Zimbabwe. Through in-depth interviews with ten Zimbabwean public managers, we find that the civil servant recruitment process in Zimbabwe is not entirely based on merit. The three main challenges identified by the study were bureaucratic power, political interference, and budget constraints due to economic crisis. These reasons are related to the features of prismatic societies where traditional and modernized values and cultural patterns coexist. Based on the results, we argue that developing countries in prismatic societies need to intentionally initiate civil service reforms—including civil servant recruitment processes—to transform the administration in a modernized way.

**Key words:** merit recruitment system, comparative public administration, prismatic society, bureaucracies, Zimbabwean public personnel management

### **INTRODUCTION**

A civil service system is an integral part of all government systems to allow critical interface between the government and its citizens. According to Ingraham (1995), the role of the civil service is to recruit qualified personnel, reward and develop the public workforce, and provide guidelines and rules to satisfy public demands. The roles of the civil service, its characteristics, and the skills of its personnel have dramatically changed to meet new demands. The functions of the civil service system in the recruitment process of civil servants should be merit-based, dynamic, responsive, and adaptive to the ever changing administrative, political, economic, and social environments (Zaman, 2015).

The civil service system in Zimbabwe, a developing country in Africa, is embedded with bureaucratic structures that are closed and rely on hierarchical authority; as a result, these structures are rigid, complex, and inflexible. Due to the inflexibility, the civil service system lacks dynamism and efficacy in the recruitment process. For the Zimbabwean context, Zungura (2014) stated that bureaucrats are motivated by self-interest and they maximize for themselves at the

expense of the public interest. There is a Public Service Act, a piece of legislation that guides a merit-based recruitment process, but it does not function properly. The existing structures that are considered to have merit are manipulated for the benefit of the elite. Bureaucratic structures in the civil service system and the management of the Public Service Commission (the government recruitment agency) in Zimbabwe are characterized by a chain of command and red tape. To this effect, the civil service recruitment process involves an extensive amount of paperwork and unnecessary delays which are detrimental to the levels of efficiency.

The most fundamental dilemma confronting the modern civil service system in Zimbabwe is determining how to neutralize the civil service system. The civil service system and the civil servants should be responsive to political direction (Smalskys and Urbanovic, 2017). In this regard, there is no clear separation between politics and the civil service system in Zimbabwe, and this has a detrimental effect on the merit-based recruitment process. The excessive use of political appointments and patronage have greatly affected the civil servant recruitment process in Zimbabwe. The merit principles are often compromised, resulting in a non-merit-based recruitment process.

While personnel management has been under-researched in most developing countries—especially in sub-Saharan African countries (World Bank, 2009)—many studies were concerned with managerial practices of Western developed countries. This indicates that there is a gap in comparative public administration literature. Acknowledging the argument by Zhou (2012) that the lack of literature has left the government of Zimbabwe and the Public Service Commission not fully informed about the challenges faced in the merit-based recruitment of civil servants, we address personnel management issues of the Zimbabwean government in this research.

The results of this study will help the government to make civil servant recruitment reforms. It is also hoped that through these results a collaborative approach can be utilized to implement a merit-based, dynamic, responsive, and effective civil service system with quality and skilled recruits. In this study, we mainly identify the challenges faced in implementing merit-based civil servant recruitment in Zimbabwe. To deeply understand the challenges of the Zimbabwean civil recruitment system, we employ Fred Riggs' prismatic society framework with qualitative methods to interview ten public managers.

## **BACKGROUND**

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in the southern region of Africa. Its neighboring countries are Mozambique (east), Botswana (west), Zambia (north), and South Africa (south). Zimbabwe proclaimed its independence from British rule in April 1980. Currently, Zimbabwe has a population of approximately 16 million people and its geographical size is about 390,757 square kilometers.

After gaining political independence in 1980, the new Zimbabwean administration inherited an administrative bureaucracy. A study conducted by Agere (1998) indicated that in the inherited administration the size, composition, operation, and orientation was heavily inclined toward the British colonial masters. This structure affected Zimbabwe's Civil Service and the recruitment system, because it did not commensurate with the socio-economic and political imperatives of the country. Although efforts were put forth, the recruitment system was in a state of crisis. Currently, all recruitments of civil servants in Zimbabwe are done by the Public Service Commission. This Commission works together with various Human Resource Teams across all the government departments. The Public Service Commission is an arm of the government created based on the terms in Section 202 of the Republic of Zimbabwe's Constitution. This commission is responsible for the administration of civil service in Zimbabwe (Kavran, 2009).

However, Chigudu (2014) discovered that there is weak accountability for human resource management in the public sector in Zimbabwe. There is a high level of discretion afforded to both politicians and senior civil servants without necessary checks and balances. Zhou (2012) asserts that civil servant recruitment procedures are often not openly competitive. Although the recruitment process and regulations are well outlined by the law, the selection stages are monopolized by the Public Service Commission. Most of the senior positions are only open to employees who are already in the system. The absence of the civil service examination affects a meritocratic recruitment of civil servants. The system has many loopholes that allow the recruitment of unqualified workers. It is a closed system that is rigid and inefficient. Reforms are viewed as destructive rather than constructive.

Zimbabwe has suffered from economic crisis for a long time. Due to these economic hardships, Zimbabwe is a country that has experienced a hyper inflationary environment for a prolonged period; this has resulted in a high fiscal deficit. To cope with the budget deficit, the government cuts expenditures by reducing the size of the civil service workforce (Makumbe, 2007).

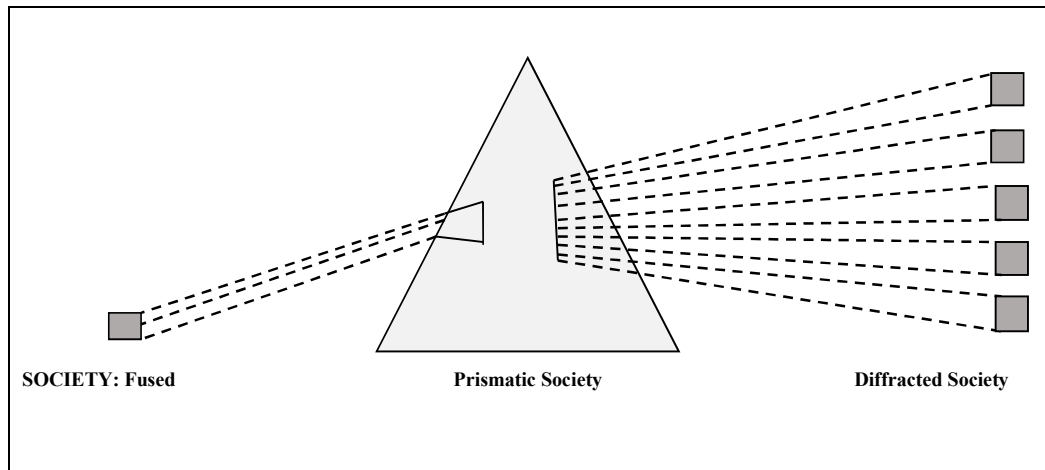
## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Prismatic Society Framework***

The term “prismatic society” was coined by Fred W. Riggs in his work, *The Ecology of Public Administration*, in 1961 (Chapman, 1966). As the father of comparative public administration, he proposed that there was a strong relationship and interaction between any form of administration and its external surrounding. The prismatic society model is a theory that explains how factors like political, social, economic, and administrative among other systems are influenced by their environments and vice versa. From a prismatic society view, Zimbabwe is regarded as one of the prismatic societies where features of both traditional and modernized societies coexist.

The prismatic society is defined as a transitional society, which is located between a fused (underdeveloped) society and diffracted (developed) society. This society has passed the fused society stage, but it lacks some qualities to become a diffracted society. According to Zwart (2010), a prismatic society is a heterogeneous society with features of both fused and diffracted societies, containing the elements of the traditional, fused type of social organizations and elements of structurally differentiated modern societies. The prismatic society is not a free society neither is it a vacuum. Riggs clearly depicts the prismatic society and its features using a diagram of a prism as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Riggs's Prismatic Model



Source: Riggs (1964)

According to Riggs (1964), there are three main characteristics of the prismatic society, which are heterogeneity, formalization, and functional overlapping. A prismatic society is homogenous in nature. It has the co-existence of the traditional and modern societies, and the simultaneous presence of different kinds of systems, practices, and viewpoints. There is a blend of chambers (fused society) and bureaus (diffracted society) in the prismatic society. Kasfir (1969) states that the prismatic society is characterized by high formalism.

There is a wide gap between theory and practice in the prismatic society. The formally prescribed regulations are not effectively practiced. In this case, the merit system may be the legal method for recruiting bureaucrats, but the actual appointments may be based on non-merit considerations such as nepotism, favoritism, or patronage. The prismatic society is also characterized by overlapping, whereby differentiated structures (clubs) co-exist with undifferentiated structures (sects). In the prismatic society, similar functions are performed by different institutions. Overlapping has five dimensions: nepotism, poly-communalism, poly-normativism, lack of consensus, and authority versus control. Recruitment is based on nepotism and favoritism as social obligations to give government positions to relatives, family members, and friends in the prismatic society. This denotes the overlapping behavior of both fused and diffracted societies.

As a transitional society, the prismatic society is characterized by political instability, increasing insecurity, inequality, negative political and administrative developments, recruitments based on attainment, high levels of corruption, double standards, and a marked difference between formal and effective institutions and practices (Weidner, 1965). It is associated with many negative factors that affect the full implementation of administrative responsibilities.

There is a strong relationship between a prismatic society and developing countries including African countries. In fact, the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa are prismatic societies. Their administrative structures can be best explained by the prismatic society theory. Zimbabwe is one of the countries characterized by the existence of a gap between theory and practice. While reforms are encouraged in the laws within the constitutions of many African countries, the practices in the public institutions and public service delivery reflect the features of the traditional society. There is formalization of the structures and as a result, the pace of success in the reforms in different sectors suffers at the stage of implementation. Developing countries in Africa are in a prismatic society stage and they suffer from institutional weaknesses which makes both

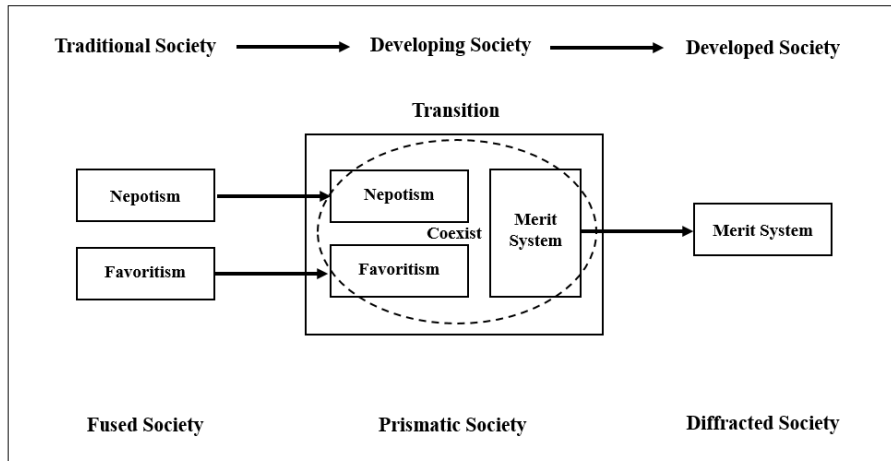
implementation and measuring results difficult (Riggs, 1964; Subban and Doorgapersad, 2014). Obinna and Evans (2019) cite Tanzania as a heterogeneous society with co-existing structures that lead to insufficient capacity both in terms of technical and resource capacity. Despite the ambition to reach the stages attained by developed countries, some African countries such as Tanzania and Nigeria have been dependent on developed countries in both technical knowhow and resources to make reforms. The prismatic society outlines that as a result of limited innovations and inventiveness, developing countries in Africa tend to pay minimum attention to the public service reforms.

There is a high emergence of some administrative problems of the prismatic society in developing countries in Africa. Although they strive to become modern societies, their administrations face some challenges from the social, economic, and political environments. Tanzania, for instance, experiences inequality and high levels of corruption while Nigeria is characterized by political instability and increasing insecurity in its administration. In their transitional phase, these countries are stuck with double standards of administration. This makes it hard to implement transparency and efficiency through auditing and performance evaluations. All these challenges resemble the prismatic society and they have stifled development reforms.

The cultural and legal environments of developing countries affect their methods of administration. According to Okotoni (2001), the judiciary and its regulations are manipulated for the benefit of the elite in Nigeria—the most populous country in Africa. There is no separation of powers between the judiciary and those with high authority, resulting in uncontrollable and unpunishable violations and manipulations of the civil service regulations. This is one of the main characteristic of the prismatic society.

Riggs (2006) states that the prismatic society reflects all these administrative challenges and helps to provide better strategies to implement effective reforms for a smooth transition to the diffracted society. The prismatic society is very crucial in the civil service fraternity. It outlines high heterogeneity, formalization, and functional overlapping as major challenges of change in the civil service. This explains why change from a non-merit-based civil service to a merit-based civil service system is embedded with a plethora of challenges. Riggs (1962) attests that in a prismatic society civil service, reforms need to be understood from a modernization of what was formerly called administrative reforms. Although many challenges are faced in transition to a merit civil service system, the prismatic society helps to understand the needs of a complete transition toward good administration. To understand the civil service system and its recruitment process, there is a need to understand its functions and structures as well. The civil service development in the prismatic society depends on the favorable conditions for change in the system. Generally, the pressure for change in the prismatic society comes from both internal and external sources of its civil service system. Utilizing the prismatic society theory for transition, this study proposed a framework from non-merit- to merit-based recruitment processes in Zimbabwe, as indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Framework



**Literature Review: Civil Service Systems in Prismatic Societies**

*Nepotism*

Nepotism is widely used in the recruitment of civil servants in traditional societies and developing countries. The term *nepotism* is defined differently from one place to another. However, scholars and researchers agree that nepotism is a non-merit system. Gjinovci (2016) defined nepotism as hiring based on family ties, friendships, and relationships with close relatives, regardless of the merits and abilities and thus discriminates against others. Nepotism is the recruitment manager’s preference or hiring of family members (nepots) rather than skilled and qualified applicants (Bellow, 2003).

According to Obrador and Uhlmann (2018), nepotism is a practice of showing or giving favors to one’s family members in economic or employment terms. This involves granting jobs to friends and relatives without regarding merit. Nepotism is the use of power or influence for attaining good jobs for or permitting unfair advantages to family members (Sherman, 2000). Nepotism is also regarded as reciprocal whereby family members depend on each other to gain favors in the job market. The interdependence within family structures views nepotism as a way used by those with power and influence to grant jobs to their family counterparts with less power and influence.

Sharir (1999) conducted a study to investigate how nepots are recruited and to identify the traits of nepotism. In concurrence, Gildenhard (2018) stated that nepotism is characterized by discrimination and inequality, non-merit appointments, and slow national development. According to Cosper (1970), nepotism discriminates against non-family members and it has been recognized as detrimental to society. It can also be detrimental to the hiring department itself. Several studies showed that nepotism is characterized by discrimination in many civil service systems in developing countries. White (2000) states that nepotism in West Africa discriminates against eligible and qualified applicants from getting civil service jobs if they are not related to the recruiting managers.

Due to its discriminative nature, nepotism is associated with inequality in the recruitment system. Nepotistic systems involve inequality whereby nepots have higher chances to be recruited than their fellow qualified applicants. In nepotism systems, family ties, kinship, and friendship are more valuable than qualifications and experiences for the job. This means that in this type of

recruitment system, qualified applicants without family ties to those with authority have lower chances to be hired in the civil service system. Previous literature shows that there are drawbacks of hiring nepots without qualifications. These nepots usually lack the ability, capacity, skills, and knowledge required to perform their duties. This contributes to the emergence of other problems like bribery, corruption, poor management, overspending, and lack of political will to make necessary reforms, of which problems are pervasive in prismatic societies.

#### *Favoritism*

Favoritism refers to the act of offering jobs and contracts to the members of a certain social group in preference to others who are outside the group (Prendergast and Topel, 1996). It is more similar to nepotism, but broader. In the recruitment process, favoritism is defined as the recruitment, appraisal, or promotion on the basis of connections and social ties rather than merit. Favoritism is regarded as a mechanism for surplus diversion, different from recruitment opportunities from the larger society, and targets small, political, social, or religious groups.

According to Bute (2011), favoritism is the separation of individuals and groups who are considered favorites from their counterparts. It is based on a certain type of connection (social, economic, political, or religious) between the favor granter and the favor recipient (favorites). In this regard, favoritism is the recruitment process that considers the privilege of non-qualified “favorites” to get jobs for which they do not qualify.

Rickman and Witt (2008) state that favoritism-based recruitment systems are characterized by selection of job applicants based on ethnic, racial, social, economic, political, and religious connections, being associated with norms and obligations to transact favors (granting jobs) to one’s group members. Two main theories were developed from the previous literature to explore the characteristics of favoritism in the public sector recruitment process.

The first theory originated in the work of Becker (1957). He states that favoritism is characterized by individuals who have a preference for hiring and working with a certain type of people over another. They are also willing to pay a price for this preference. The second theory of Arrow and Phelps (1972) alludes that favoritism is characterized by individuals who have limited information about the skills and abilities of others. They, therefore, go on to say that favoritism is an equilibrium phenomenon which is sustained by negative beliefs regarding the relation between observable characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, or gender) and unobservable characteristics (such as skills). The combination of these theories gives adequate characteristics that explain the reasons why individuals opt for favoritism-based recruitments.

Ackerman (1996) states that since favoritism creates a homogenous workforce with shared values, it is easy to achieve collective goals. Common values, religious beliefs, and aligned political ideologies in a favoritism-based system result in a coherent civil service system with high consensus. This system manages conflicts in an amicable way based on shared values, beliefs, and ideologies. The favoritism-based system is centered on the transactions and maintenance of favors. Therefore, favoritism is good as it fosters relentless loyalty and interdependence which are beneficiary toward the proper functioning of a civil service system. According to previous studies, favoritism is prevalent in both developing and developed countries, but in the former it is more common.

#### *Merit system*

When a country’s civil servants are hired based on a merit system, its civil service can contribute to national development. According to McCourt (2007), a merit system is defined as a process of hiring and promoting government employees based on their ability to perform the job. It is

designed to ensure fair, open recruitment, competition, and free employment opportunities unburdened by political influence and any other non-merit factors. In the broadest sense, a merit system in modern civil service means a personnel system in which ability or achievement govern each individual's selection. Sen (2000) divided merit into closed and open merit systems.

The merit-based recruitment system is a practice of identifying the correct human resource pool and selecting the best candidates to occupy job vacancies (Reynolds and Xian, 2014). It is a mechanism for fair recruitment without political interference or any other forms of influence. The merit system is a recruitment method used to cope with the challenges of patronage, nepotistic, and favoritistic recruitment systems. It is guided by laws and regulations to be followed in the recruitment process. Unlike other types of recruitment systems, a merit-based recruitment system is a standardized and objective approach to hire the most competent, skilled, and qualified job applicant. It is a blind recruitment process to avoid the influence of connections and social ties among the recruitment managers to choose the right candidate.

Graper's (2005) work indicates that a merit system promotes diversity. In the recruitment process, the merit system values cultural, gender, and generational diversity. Similarly, Subramanian (2019) investigated the relationship between diversity and merit, finding out that the merit system creates equal chance for applicants from all cultural backgrounds to be hired in the civil system. Frasher (2007) indicates that building a merit-based recruitment system is very complex for many countries because of several constraints. Studies in the U.S., Britain, and Australia indicated that in the beginning of 1880s, their civil service systems were plagued by problems of corruption and inefficiency. White (2010) states that during George Washington's administration, most of the war collaborators were prized with important positions in the civil service.

In some cases, the merit system requires extra documents such as medical reports and high-paid examinations, thereby discriminating against those who cannot afford to obtain the paperwork. In the merit system, a civil service examination is used as the main criteria of the recruitment process, but sometimes its validity is questioned. High scores in the examination may not always equate to high performance. Candidates may have knowledge without skills and capability to turn it into practice. In the Zimbabwean context where merit is a nominal standard, patronage is still common where the perceived merit is manipulated for political gains, as it is in other prismatic societies.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In-depth interviews were used to examine the challenges of the civil recruitment process in Zimbabwe. Non-probability sampling was utilized to select 10 public managers in Zimbabwe whose qualities and experiences permit an understanding of the research topic to participate in this study. In this respect, participants for this study were selected purposively to inform an understanding of the civil servant recruitment process. These participants who are employed as public managers in the civil service were selected from the Public Service Commission and other government departments. The selection was mainly based on the researcher's personal judgment, not the affiliated government department.

Once selected, a letter of informed consent was initially discussed over the phone and once consent was granted, the interview commenced through email. Silverman (2000) defined in-depth interview as a qualitative research instrument. It utilizes a list of open-ended questions to gather information on the area of study. The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data from public managers of various departments of the Zimbabwean civil service system. Ten interview questionnaires were sent through emails to the 10 selected participants.



## RESULTS

### **Challenge 1: Bureaucratic power**

Multiple participants reported that excessive bureaucratic power in the civil service system has detrimental effects on the implementation of merit-based recruitment. Both the civil service system and the main recruitment agent, the Public Service Commission, are characterized by bureaucratic structures.

*“The recruitment system in our country is affected by bureaucratic structures that are rigid, inflexible, and closed. The civil service system and the recruitment process is designed in a way that exclude external influence.”* (Participant 5)

*“The current civil service system is characterized by red tape because of bureaucratic nature lack of responsiveness. The lack of responsiveness in our recruitment system results in failure to meet the quality, quantity of the recruits thereby compromising merit.”* (Participant 9)

*“Bureaucratic structures within the civil service have turned it into a closed system. Therefore, our civil service system cannot interact with or respond to the outside environment. It is still using the old ways of operations that are now outdated. This is the reason why merit-based recruitment system is not being implemented as new way of operation.”* (Participant 4)

The civil service system in Zimbabwe is embedded with many rules and regulations. To affect any change there are some protocols to be followed.

*“Personally I have tried many ways to promote merit in the hiring at our department level but there was a lot of protocols to be followed. It took a long time for my requests and proposals to be accepted and the end nothing was endorsed. Bureaucratic systems cannot adapt some changes over night and constant persuasions for change to merit can result in conflicts and tensions.”* (Participant 10)

Other participants indicated that the fear of cultural change within the bureaucratic structures and the fear of losing bureaucratic power result in delaying the implementation of a merit-based recruitment process in Zimbabwe.

*“One of the main challenges that we face in implementing merit system is the resistance from our counterparts with bureaucratic power. Although most of them have some capacity to implement merit-based recruitments they think that later on it may create some threats to their power and authority.”* (Participant 3)

The bureaucratic structures in the civil service system are highly centralized. There is a top-down chain of command. As a result, one government recruitment agency (Public Service Commission) is responsible for the recruitment of all civil servants. The study revealed that the bureaucratic power in the civil service system gave all the recruitment responsibilities and authorities to the Public Service Commission. The centralization of the civil service recruitment processes created many challenges in skills assessment and talent identification, thereby affecting merit considerations.

*“The recruitment of all civil servants is no longer done at the department level but at the national level. All recruitments are now processed in the capital city by one government agency. The human resource teams at various departments identify vacancies and send them to the Public Service Commission. The commission then advertises and carries out interviews and sends the list of successful job applicants to*

*the responsible departments. In my opinion, this level of bureaucracy has affected the quality of the recruitment process because it is complex, and it ruins merit.*" (Participant 1)

The majority of the applicants indicated their concerns about a bureaucratic civil service system that determines who is to be hired in their departments without considering the departmental internal operations. It was revealed that most of the recruitment personnel in the Public Services Commission have much knowledge on human resources and personnel management, but they lack knowledge about each and every government department's expectation of its recruitment process. This causes irrational decision making in the recruitment process, which is the opposite of merit-based recruitment.

*"Most of the recruitments are done from a human resource perspective without considering other skills needed in the department with a job vacancy. As a result, applicants with managerial skills are recruited even in the vacancies that require technical skills. This creates conflicts because sometimes departments have their own desired technical candidates which are different from managerial related applicants that they receive from the commission after the recruitment process. The hiring departments usually end up feeling like the commission had imposed recruitments on them. In this situation, a meritocratic system cannot be easily achieved."* (Participant 6)

### **Challenge 2: Political Interference**

The evil of political interference in the civil service system is an obstacle for the full implementation of the merit system in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that it is very difficult to implement a merit system in the Zimbabwean civil service system, because there is no balance between partisan politics and the institutions of the state. There is extensive political intervention and political abuse in the civil service system. This denotes that instead of focusing on merit issues, the civil service system follows the political direction.

*"The promotion and recruitment of civil servants is based on loyalty and respect to those with the political power rather than professional capability and experience. This act of politicizing our civil service system has killed meritocracy."* (Participant 2)

*"There is no clear separation of politics and the civil service system. Everything that is operated by the government is politicized and owned by the ruling political party. The civil service system is not free to make its decisions like implementing the merit system without the political interferences."* (Participant 8)

*"Due to high political interference in our civil service system a transition to merit system is national dream that can take ages to become a reality."* (Participant 3)

During the interviews, one interviewee talked about the violation of laws and regulations that were set in place to ensure merit-based recruitment. This means that merit laws and guidelines are there, but their implementation is disrupted by the politicians and the political pressure groups to fulfill their political and personal interests. Through political interferences, those with political power and influence identify gaps to manipulate and violate the merit recruitment laws for their benefit.

*"The current civil service system already has merit laws and regulations in place, but they are not fully implemented because in reality, here politics is above the law. Section 83 of the constitution and the Public Service Act give proper guidelines of how civil servants*

*should be recruited to ensure merit, but they are not observed in many cases.*" (Participant 7)

*"Our country is very good at designing and making lucrative civil service laws and policies, but the actual implementation is poor because of violations and manipulations. The main reason why merit is hard to implement is that we don't respect our own merit regulations in the current civil service system. We make merit regulations then later on they are violated and at the end we will remain with the same non merit ways of recruiting the civil servants."* (Participant 4)

Political interference and its non-merit practices like patronage, nepotism, and favoritism creates conflicts between political appointees, nepots, favorites, and qualified career civil servants. Placing political appointees and career civil servants to work together in the same department creates tensions and conflict regarding the implementation of the merit-based civil servants.

*"It is hard to achieve merit when political appointees are working in the same department with career civil servants because of differences. They tend to control each other resulting in endless arguments and disagreements."* (Participant 10)

The public managers also complained that political interferences had created many ghost workers. According to the participants, these workers are on the list of civil servants and they receive salaries every month, but they do not physically exist.

*"Due to political intervention, almost every department of the civil service has some ghost workers who are on the payroll. The major question is who receive their salaries without doing any work. These ghost workers are well known but they are never removed from the system because they have deep political roots. Their existence is a great disturbance for transparency issues and for building a strong merit-based civil service system."* (Participant 9)

### **Challenge 3: Budget Constraints due to Economic Crisis**

The study showed that economic crises such as poor economic production and high inflation were contributing to non-merit recruitment practices in the civil service system of Zimbabwe. Economic crisis is regarded as a barrier toward the implementation of the merit-based recruitment of civil servants, because the civil service system lacks financial capacity. The economic environment is not conducive for the full implementation of the merit-based recruitment.

*"The economic crisis that is currently faced by the whole country have affected all government institutions including the civil service system. All the operations including the recruitment process is guided by the civil service budget. This means that the amount of financial inputs determines the processes and outputs in the civil service system. Since there is lack of financial capacity due to the economic crisis, the civil service system is struggling to implement the merit system."* (Participant 8)

Multiple participants also mentioned how an economic crisis contributes to corruption in the Zimbabwean civil service system. They highlighted the poor salaries that the recruitment managers and other public managers receive. The personnel who conduct the civil service recruitment process are not paid well and they are tempted to engage in corrupt, non-merit activities to get extra money to increase their incomes. This is causing corruption whereby applicants are buying job favors from the recruitment managers.

*"Our salaries are not good enough for our living expenses. We are usually underpaid as compared to our counterparts with same job positions in other developing countries. I think this is the reason why corruption is rampant in the civil service system. We are not satisfied*

*by our salaries and this badly affects our performance. It is very difficult to do the work correctly when you are not satisfied that's why some public managers resort to non-merit ways of recruitment because it's easy and not complex."* (Participant 1)

*"You cannot expect someone to be honest and to be committed when the payment is below the standard. Our level of honesty and commitment as public managers to implement the merit system is reduced."* (Participant 7)

Bribery was also revealed as an unethical transaction used to access jobs in the civil service system. To cope with poor salaries, some public managers receive bribes from the applicants in exchange for jobs.

*"Bribery is now a common practice in the recruitment process. Although not every public manager take bribery. There are many cases where applicants buy jobs. This had created inequalities and discrimination of the applicants who cannot pay bribes. This act of bribery destroyed the ethical considerations that are vital in the implementation of the merit-based recruitment."* (Participant 9)

*"The unethical practice of bribery brought confusion and disorder in the operations and recruitment process of our civil service system. The desire to implement the merit system is overpowered by the financial gains of bribery."* (Participant 5)

Due to economic crisis, the government usually faces a budget deficit. Participants indicated that the government cut the expenditure by reducing the size of the civil service system. Whenever the budget is not sufficient, the government retrenches some civil servants to reduce its costs.

*"One problem with our government is that they usually cut the size of the civil service workforce whenever the national budget is not balancing. Several departments are forced to carry out massive retrenchment. This means that there is always loss of some quality employees who are hard to replace when there is a budget surplus. Sudden retrenchments create more problems in implementing a merit system."* (Participant 6)

*"Budget constraints limits the application of merit in the recruitment process because the civil service system strives to operate within the limits of the available budget and sometimes it is down sized."* (Participant 1)

In Figure 3, we suggest the reasons why Zimbabwe has not implemented merit-based practices in the civil servant recruitment process. Riggs (1964) named bureaucracy in prismatic societies as *sala*, which is a Spanish word, indicating that the bureaucracy has a mixture of both bureaucratic features in traditional societies and those in modernized societies. The prismatic society theory indicates that *sala* bureaucracy involves corruption such as bribery, cheating, and nepotism in the process of recruitment (Harber, 1993).

In addition, there is a discrepancy between formal and effective behavior in *sala* bureaucracy, meaning that a clear gap exists between "what should be done" and "what is done" (Chapman, 1966). Our findings show that there are rules and laws regarding merit in the Zimbabwean government, but they have not been properly implemented in the real field. There is a clear divide between politics and administration in developed countries, thus politics does not interfere with bureaucrats. But politics and administration are not completely separate in *sala* bureaucracy, and interference in administration by politics are pervasive in prismatic society, which is also observed in our study.

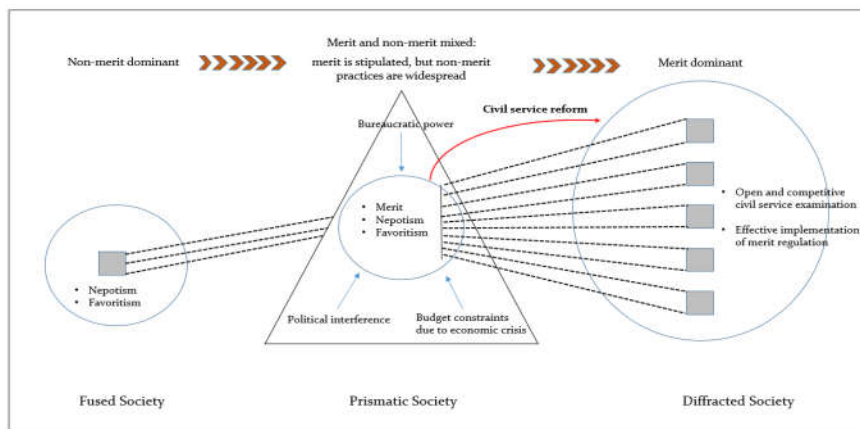
Another finding that should be addressed in our study is that the Zimbabwean government faces budget constraints that hinder the implementation of the merit system. Although Fred Riggs did not specify the budget constraint as a peculiarity of bureaucracy in a prismatic society, it can be

easily inferred that many developing countries confront financial difficulties resulting from the gap between “reality” of the present and “ideal state” of the future. At times, such financial difficulties may come from corruption related to bribery that reduce tax collection or from embezzlement of an international support fund by persons holding political power.

In Zimbabwe, the merit system exists but it does not function properly and civil servant recruitment is made in such a non-standardized way as nepotism, as is the case in prismatic societies. Some scholars call prismatic societies as “transitional” ones to refer to the mid-point between traditional “fused” and modernized “diffracted” societies. But Riggs hesitated to use that term, instead he utilized prismatic societies because those societies were not automatically transferred to modernized diffracted societies over time. Some prismatic societies may move to diffracted ones, and other prismatic societies can sustain permanently (Riggs, 1964). As traditional and modern values and behavior coexist in prismatic societies, they are more likely to transfer to diffracted societies when people follow modernized behavior and accept modernized values as much as they possibly can.

Although it may be very difficult for all traits of prismatic societies to change to that of diffracted societies in Zimbabwe, nepotism-based civil recruitment systems can be transformed to the merit ones through appropriate efforts. Similar civil service reforms are needed to those that many developed countries have already experienced, such as the United Kingdom (the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854) and the United States (e.g., the Pendleton Act in 1883). The primary step for reforming the civil servant recruitment system is to adopt open and competitive civil service examinations to secure fairness from hiring corruption due to nepotism. In addition, it is necessary to establish institutional arrangement to manage and control for effective implementation of the merit system while benchmarking managerial practices of developed countries.

Figure 3. Factors that Affect the Zimbabwean Civil Service System



## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to identify the challenges faced in implementing merit-based civil servant recruitment in Zimbabwe. The key findings of the study indicate that the civil servant recruitment process in Zimbabwe is not entirely based on merit. This study found that the main challenges identified by the study were bureaucratic power, political interference, and budget constraints due to economic crisis faced by the Zimbabwean government. These characteristics were shared with those of prismatic societies suggested by Riggs (1964). Riggs claims that many developing countries belong to the prismatic society where traditional and modernized modes and values coexist. Specifically, rules of merit have been stipulated in the Zimbabwean government,

but nepotism-based recruitment is prevalent for the aforementioned reasons, leading to a litany of corruption inside government.

Our findings suggest that many developing governments in prismatic societies, as well as the Zimbabwean government, are finding new ways to reform governments. Civil service reforms should be initiated in a way that personal management, including the recruitment system, be merit-based. Prismatic features in government are not automatically changed or advanced, but intentionally transformed through active civil service reforms. To secure fairness in civil servant recruitment, open competitive civil service examination needs to be implemented. South Korea is a good example for benchmarking it where open competitive civil service examination has systematically been implemented for a long time. In addition to recruitment systems, using managerial practices based on merit is important inside government. Developing countries should try to benchmark or adopt merit-based personnel management practices from developed countries—what is referred to as diffracted societies in Riggs' terminology—in order to modernize administration to increase efficiency.

Although this study contributes to the competitive public management literature, we acknowledge it has some limitations. The study is qualitative in nature; hence, it is not based on empirical evidence. Qualitative data based on personal knowledge and experience was used for this study. Therefore, it was hard to quantify some useful data that could have added much value to the study. The use of qualitative tools only was not adequate for the extraction of more scientific data that could have been analyzed and verified using quantitative methods. Future research is recommended to empirically test our findings to confirm their validity. The study has a representation problem of interviewing only ten public managers. All the results were generalized based on this small sample. Ten public managers are not enough to represent the whole civil service system. These managers were all based in urban areas and it is difficult to generalize the results to rural settings. In the future, a large sample which includes both the urban and rural participants will give good results.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

We are grateful to public managers in government agencies in Zimbabwe for participating in in-depth interviews for this study. This research paper is a revised version of the master's thesis of Overson who has received a Master's degree from Hanyang University under the direction of Professor Lee.