

**Research article**

# Gray Zone in the Selection of Senior Executive Service Positions

Sulaeman Fattah, Erwin Musdah\*, and Arif Alauddin Umar

Politeknik STIA LAN Makassar

**ORCID**

Erwin Musdah: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8330-5157>

**Abstract.**

The selection of senior executive service positions in Indonesia is carried out openly as part of the merit system. Although this policy has been in place for the past few years, senior executive service position selection in Indonesia still faces many obstacles. This research examined the process of each stage of the open selection process in Wajo and Pare-Pare. Qualitative methods were used with a case study approach. The main conclusion of this research was that there are still weaknesses in the open selection process, especially in the selection of senior executive service positions, where there is still a gray area. The absence of more specific standards regarding the selection process means that the selection committee has great power in determining the selection standards, particularly in terms of interviews and writing samples. The high percentage of evaluations for selections can mean that the acceptance of the participants is determined by the subjectivity of the selection committee. It was found that the selection process was not good enough to assess the competence of the selection participants. Although the selection process follows regulations, the results do not reflect the objective of the merit system, which is to recruit based on the skills of employees.

**Keywords:** recruitment, open selection, senior executive service positions

Corresponding Author: Erwin  
Musdah; email:  
[erwinmusdah@stialanmakassar.  
ac.id](mailto:erwinmusdah@stialanmakassar.ac.id)

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## 1. Introduction

In Indonesia, the issue of appointing civil servants to structural positions has been debated for a long time. The politicization of the long-entrenched bureaucracy from the Suharto era left a number of problems until the reform era. The practice of dynastic politics which still prevails has led to appointments based on family networks [1]. In addition, the patron-client culture still present in the bureaucracy has led state civil apparatus to get involved in regional elections to seek opportunities to access positions in the bureaucracy [2]. As a result, the phenomenon of post-election promotion, transfer and demotion of civil servants still occurs frequently in various places in Indonesia.

The government has paid more attention to this issue. Human resource governance has become one of the bureaucratic reform agendas in Indonesia. Open selection,


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often referred to as a job auction, has been established as one of the mechanisms for fulfilling senior executive positions in Government Agencies. This mechanism is regulated in seven articles in Law Number 5 of 2014 concerning State Civil Apparatus (UU ASN). These articles contain instructions and mechanisms for filling the positions of the principal, middle and high leaders openly and transparently. Article 108 of the Civil Service (ASN) Act emphasizes that an open and competitive selection system should consider the requirements of competence, qualifications, rank, education, and training, positions track records, and employee integrity. This conception is seen to be developed from the concept of a merit system. This concept is the opposite of a spoil system based on closeness, friendship, kinship, or political support. McCrudden identified five merit models which, if concluded, more or less contain the meaning of non-discriminatory process, quality-oriented, suitability between process and selection objectives, pay attention to the nature of work, and benefit the organization [3]. In this context, merit is seen as a characteristic that will work well if institutionalized into a merit system.

A feature of this merit system, the open selection system, has been widely accepted in human resource management practice. The Global Center for Public Service Excellent describes the application of the merit system in four ways. Two of them are open selection and the best candidate selection [4]. United States also makes the open selection based on competence and capability as the first principle of applying the merit system [5]. Likewise, in Australia, promotions use a competitive promotion system and focus on the suitability of the candidate's capacity with job qualifications [6].

The implementation of open selection in Indonesia has been carried out in recent years. Formally, the implementation of the open selection refers to the Minister of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform 13 of 2014 concerning Procedures for Fulfilling the Position of Senior Executive Service through Open Selection in Government Agencies. In July 2019, the Minister of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform issued regulation Number 15 of 2019 concerning the Open and Competitive Filling of Senior Executive Service Positions in Government Agencies. This regulation disables the previous regulation. In practice, this open selection is still assessed in various ways based on research results. Several studies revealed that the implementation of open selection went well with several obstacles [7–10]. On the other hand, several studies have concluded that open selection has not gone well [3,11,12]. This study provides an explanation why with the same regulations, there are still differences in their implementation in various places.

In addition to the realm of implementation, several previous studies have examined the challenges of implementing open selection [13], accountability of open selection [14], ethical behavior of the selection committee [15], and the leadership of actors resulting from open selection [16]. Existing studies still focus on the process and results after the selection system is running. Research on the process and material for each stage of the selection has not been done much. In fact, the materials and process of open selection are the essential tools to measure the competence of candidates for office. If the materials and selection process are not carried out properly, it will be impossible to produce qualified officials, and in the end, the merit system will not be realized. For this reason, this research aims to examine the process and material for open selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare.

## 2. Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. The case analyzed is the implementation of the open selection of positions in government agencies in two districts in South Sulawesi. This research was conducted in Wajo Regency and Pare-Pare City in 2020. The data were sourced from interviews with key informants who were selected purposively. The informants of this research were members of the selection committee, participants of the Senior Executive Service Positions selection, the Agency for Personnel and Human Resources Development and the secretariat team of open selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare. To maintain objectivity, the selection participants we interviewed met the elements of selection participants who were appointed and not appointed as senior executive service positions. In addition, we collect secondary data in the form of documents for the implementation of job selection. These data were obtained from the Regional Personnel Agency, the committee's secretariat, and the senior executive service positions selection committee in Wajo and Pare-Pare.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. Open Selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare: The Case

This study describes the senior executive service positions selection process in Wajo and Pare-Pare. Wajo is one of 21 regencies in South Sulawesi Province. Meanwhile, Pare-Pare is one of three cities in South Sulawesi. Both in Wajo and Pare-Pare, the

senior executive service positions selection has been carried out several times. For this reason, this study examines the latest selection cases in each region.

The last open selection in Pare-Pare was the senior executive service positions selection held from July to August 2019. The senior executive service positions selection in Pare-Pare was carried out to fill eight vacant positions, namely: Assistant for General Administration; Assistant for Economics, Development, and Public Relations; Head of Regional Finance Agency; Head of the Department of Agriculture, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries; Head of the Pare-Pare City Food Security Service; Head of Youth, Sports, and Tourism Office; Head of the Population Control and Family Planning Agency; and Head of Department. 19 participants attended the selection.

In Wajo, the last open selection was the senior executive service positions selection held from March to June 2020. The selection was carried out to fill 19 positions, namely:

1. Secretary of the Regional People's Representative Council;
2. Assistant for Government and People's Welfare;
3. Assistant for Economics and Development;
4. General Administration Assistant;
5. Expert Staff for Government, Law and Politics;
6. Expert Staff for Economics, Finance and Development;
7. Expert Staff for Community and Human Resources;
8. Head of Department of Education and Culture;
9. Head of Health Office;
10. Head of Social Service, Population Control, Family Planning, Women's Empowerment and Child Protection;
11. Head of the Department of Transportation;
12. Head of the Office of Communication, Information and Communication;
13. Head of Population and Civil Registration Service;
14. Head of Department of Industry, Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises;
15. Head of Community and Village Empowerment Service;

16. Head of Regional Planning, Development, Research and Development Agency;
17. Head of National and Political Unity Agency;
18. Head of Regional Disaster Management Agency;
19. Regional Inspector.

49 participants attended this selection.

## **3.2. Open Selection Stage**

### **3.2.1. Administration Selection**

The Secretariat carries out the administrative selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare. The Secretariat team checks the files and submits the final results to the selection committee for determination. In Wajo, out of 49 people who registered to take part in the open selection, at the administrative selection stage, five people did not pass the administrative selection. They do not complete the required administrative documents, meet the qualification requirements for a rank, are more than 56 years old, or have not attended Leadership Education and Training III. In Pare-Pare, all participants who submit files are declared to meet the administrative requirements. The administrative selection stage is relatively running according to the rules because the indicators are clear. If the file is complete, then it meets the requirements. Meanwhile, if the file is incomplete or does not meet the requirements, it will automatically not meet the requirements and continue at the next stage.

### **3.2.2. Track Record Tracking**

In the Regulation of the Minister of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform 15 of 2019, track record searches can be carried out through an evaluation of applicant profiles to see the suitability of the position applied for and the potential in carrying out job duties which include:

1. positions that have been and are currently being occupied;
2. formal educational background;
3. leadership and technical/functional education and training that have been followed;

4. outstanding achievements while carrying out tasks;
5. Owned integrity.

Tracking track records in Wajo, using six assessment indicators, namely:

1. Rank with a percentage value of 15%
2. Training and Education with a percentage of 15%
3. Education with a percentage value of 20%
4. Position History with a percentage value of 20%
5. Technical/Functional training with a percentage of 15%
6. Assessment of the Work Performance of Civil Servants with a percentage of 15%

Out of the six-track record assessment indicators used by the Senior Executive Service Positions Selection Committee in Wajo, the indicators used for integrity assessment have not been found. This was also encountered by one of the senior executive service positions selection participants in Wajo. Integrity points became the participants' attention after observing the scores of other participants who were known to have been dismissed from positions due to findings from the inspectorate. This fact also shows the lack of transparency in the track record assessment. Participants were not given any indicators in providing track record scores.

We found other problems from the results of the document study. There are two severe problems with track record assessment. First, the track record assessment is based on participant data. Assessment is not given based on the position applied for. Each participant is only assessed once without considering the position applied for. This first problem causes the second problem namely the standard of competence of the position is not considered in the awarding of track record scores. On the standard competency document, education is written as a prerequisite for the position. For example, one of the vacant positions requires the fields of Social Science, Economics, or Social Politics. Two applicants for this position have educational backgrounds outside the three fields of science but scored 90 and 100 on the assessment of educational track records.

### **3.2.3. Assesment**

The Competency Assessment held on Thursday-Friday, 4 – 5 June 2020, in Pola Room of the Wajo Regent's Office. Competency assessment on senior executive service

positions selection in Wajo was carried out by the Technical Implementation Unit (UPT) for Potential and Competency Assessment, Regional Personnel Agency of South Sulawesi Province. The recapitulation of the assessment was carried out on Thursday-Friday, 18-19 June 2020, at the UPT for Potential and Competency Assessment of Regional Civil Service Agency South Sulawesi Province. Assessment is carried out on eight managerial competency standards and one socio-cultural competency standard. Out of 44 people who took part in the assessment, 20 were in the eligible category, while 24 others were in the still eligible category. In Pare-Pare, the assessment was conducted on Friday-Monday, 16-19 August 2019 at the Pare-Pare Human Resources Development and Personnel Agency Office.

Out of four stages of selection, this assessment is considered the most objective and does not find many obstacles. Selection Participants Number 1 of the Wajo stated, "there are four selections: the assessment centre, paper writing, paper interviews, and track records. The third one is subjective, immeasurable, in a different sense from the assessment centre" (interview 11 July 2020).

Because the test is considered objective, participants suggest that the percentage in determining the final score is added in this test. Selection Participant Number 3 in Pare-Pare revealed: "perhaps the portion of the value needs to be increased...the ability to analyze, make decisions, maybe need to be a part of the exam" (interview 6 August 2020).

### 3.2.4. Paper Writing

The stage of writing papers in the 2020 senior executive service positions selection in Wajo was carried out on Saturday, June 6, 2020, from 09.15 to 12.15 in the pattern room of the Wajo Regent's Office. Within three hours, participants were assigned to write as many papers as the position applied for. Because each participant is required to choose three positions, practically each composes three papers in three hours. We obtained three sample papers from participants who passed the top three in certain positions. Two of the three authors of the paper were successfully appointed as senior executive service positions. We found that in writing papers, participants were asked to fill in the form provided by the committee systematically:

1. A systematic overview of the position of interest (can describe things such as: main tasks and functions and/or job descriptions)
2. Problem Identification

3. Solution or troubleshooting
4. Follow-up plan
5. Innovation

Each section is provided with one page consisting of 18 to 25 lines to be filled in by hand. The short time for writing papers causes participants to not be optimal in writing papers. As a result, the papers prepared by the participants are prioritized on the first choice papers. The second and third choices were only made modestly. This is also obvious in the three samples of participant papers that we read.

Another problem we found at the selection stage of writing a paper in Wajo was the assessment problem considered less objective. We identified three things that caused the problem. First, this assessment format was not conveyed to the selection participants. Second, there is a possibility that the participant's writing is illegible, so it is not easy to give a score. Third, the assessment time is too narrow and overlaps with the interview assessment time. The time for writing papers is finished at 12.15 WITA, and interviews start at 13.00 on the same day. If each participant is only given 10 minutes, then it is clear that there is not enough time for the panel to assess three papers at the same time conducting interviews.

Unlike in Wajo, which has its schedule, writing papers in Pare-Pare is part of the administrative requirements so that participants are allowed to compile their papers well independently. However, the writing of papers in Pare-Pare has not been accompanied by a clear format. The only guide that is used as a guide in compiling a paper is that the paper must not be more than ten pages.

### 3.2.5. Interviews

Interviews in Wajo were held on Saturday 6 June 2020 at 13.00 – 17.35 and continued on Sunday, 7 June 2020 at 08.00 – 11.30 in the Wajo Regency Regional Secretariat Room. Each participant was interviewed separately by the selection committee with a parallel system. Based on the schedule prepared by the committee, each participant is scheduled to interview with each selection committee for 10 minutes. In practice, the interview time varies from 5 to 15 minutes. During this time, participants were generally asked about what they wrote in the paper they had written. The questions from the selection committee seemed to explore more managerial competence.

On the other hand, technical, socio-cultural, and government competencies were less elaborated in the interviews. Whereas in the assessment sheet, there are four



types of competencies. The selection committee rates each competency. This raises the question of how to score without questioning the participants.

In addition to the substance of the questions, the interview method was also questioned by the participants. Under normal circumstances, interviews are generally conducted in the form of panels. What happened during the interview in Wajo was the new normal. The Covid-19 pandemic has restricted people from gathering, so it was decided to use a separate system in separate rooms. Selection Committee Number 1 in Wajo revealed that he hoped for a panel model to be easier to check and balance questions from other panels (interview October 2020).

In Pare-Pare, the interview stage was held on Tuesday-Wednesday, 20-21 August 2019 at Pare Beach Hotel. The length of the interview varied between 10-30 minutes. In the interview process, the selection committee asked about the position's main tasks and functions, track record of achievement, the substance of government, and willingness to cooperate with the leadership. Although there are many questions for the selection participants, Selection Participant Number 2 in Pare-Pare still feels that the questions have not fully explored their competencies. He explained:

“In next selection, the time should be added again. Do not be too short of asking the participants something. I mean, sir, we applied for the position of general administrative assistant, but the average question was only one, Mr Abrar only asked one question, and even then it deviated from general administration” (interview August 5, 2020)

The results of the interviews submitted by the selection participants in Wajo and Pare-Pare revealed that the interview process had not been able to become a means to explore the competence of the selection participants.

### 3.3. Gray Zone In Open Selection

The 2020 senior executive service positions open selection implementation is carried out based on the Regulation of the Minister of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform Number 15 of 2019. There are five selection mechanisms regulated in the regulation, including tracking track records, administrative selection, selection of managerial and social-cultural competencies, selection of field competencies, and final interviews. The five types of exams are grouped into four categories of assessment with percentages of assessment:

- a) Writing papers with a percentage of 15% to 20%;
- b) Assessment center with a percentage of 20% to 25%;
- c) Interviews with a percentage of 30% to 35%;

d) Track record with a percentage of 15% to 20%.

Administrative selection is not assessed but is carried out at the beginning to determine whether participants can continue the selection or not. The selection of managerial and socio-cultural competencies is carried out through an assessment centre. Selection of field competencies is done through writing papers. The last one is the interview.

Selection of technical competence in Wajo and Pare-Pare is done through the method of writing papers. The regulation regulates three things regarding this selection: the selection method, the obligation to refer to the competency standards of the position, and announcements. The selection method is only mentioned using the written method and interviews or/and other methods. There is no more technical explanation of the format, working mechanism, and assessment of the writing of the paper.

Similar conditions were also found in the final interview selection. The regulations only generally regulate the affirmation of the authority and duties of the selection committee in interviews, the function of the interview as a means of clarification and deepening of the four competencies, and opportunities to use resource persons to assist the selection committee in conducting interviews. There are no further rules on the mechanism and assessment of the interview. Conditions like this seem to be common in the implementation of senior executive service positions selection in Indonesia, as is also evident in several studies, which in essence conclude that senior executive service positions selection is still decorated with the phenomenon of non-transparent assessment [8] and uncertainty of time at each selection stage [17].

On the other hand, for track record selection, regulations have regulated how to tracking track records and what indicators are assessed. Even so, the percentage of assessment for each indicator is still left to the selection committee. Likewise, for selecting managerial and social-cultural competencies, the regulation stipulates an assessment centre as the primary method of testing this competency. Although not regulated in detail, this method is commonly used in the selection process. In addition, many institutions and assessors have been certified, so that it can be assumed that the implementation of this selection can be carried out with relatively the same standards.

Based on existing regulations and research results, it was found that there was a tendency to link the clarity of the mechanism and assessment standards with trust in the selection process. The study results revealed that the assessment centre was the selection stage with the most trusted objectivity by the selection participants. On the other hand, interviews and writing papers left many complaints from the selection participants, which in the end also lowered their trust in the selection mechanism.

In addition to the problem of the selection process, the selection material is also a problem in the selection of interviews and writing papers. The results of the study revealed that there were participants who were not given questions, the questions did not conform to the position applied for, and the questions were only related to one dimension of competence. Thus the test material for both tests was considered not good enough to be used as a standard in assessing the competence of selection participants.

The problem with the process and substance of the open selection is because the policies that are the reference for the open selection have not been adequately regulated, especially in the selection of interviews and writing papers. The absence of more technical standards in the regulation of open selection in the two types of selection gives the selection committee too much subjectivity. This condition is exacerbated because the percentage of assessments for the two selections can reach 55% of the total assessment. That is, the majority of the assessment depends on the subjectivity of the selection committee.

Instead of recruiting candidates for high-ranking officials based on competence, the weakness of the open selection policy can be exploited by a selection committee with no integrity. If the selection committee does not have good integrity, open selection may only be a means of sealing the authorities to place the desired people in certain positions. If so, the aspired merit system through an open selection process is impossible to achieve.

## 4. Conclusion

Meritocracy in government administration has inherently been applied in the selection process for senior executive service positions in Indonesia. However, ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubts about the quality of the selection (read: grey zone) are still visible, both from the policy and implementation aspects. From the policy aspect, the implementation of the senior executive service positions selection in Wajo and Parepare followed the administrative provisions (requirements and mechanisms). However, on the other hand, the policy also provides an excellent opportunity for the subjectivity of the selection committee in assessing administrative indicators, track records, assessments, papers and interviews, giving rise to an assessment that the selection results do not reflect the purpose of the merit system, namely recruitment based on employee competence.

From the implementation aspect, the senior executive service positions selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare has indeed been carried out following the specified procedures

and stages. However, only the administrative selection and assessment stages are considered explicit in the format and indicators, while for the track record, paper and interview stages, the format and assessment indicators are considered unclear and not transparent. Based on this, it is not surprising that the research results show a significant tendency to doubt the quality of the results of the senior executive service positions selection in Wajo and Pare-Pare even though they are considered successful in their implementation.

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