

Organizational Culture as an Institutional Mechanism Shaping Merit-Based Recruitment of Senior Public Officials in South Sudan

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to examine how organizational culture influences recruitment outcomes in public sector institutions, particularly in fragile and post-conflict contexts where formal merit-based recruitment rules coexist with informal practices such as political patronage, ethnic balancing, and loyalty-based appointments. **Design/Methodology/Approach:** The article used a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review of theoretical and empirical scholarship on merit-based recruitment, organizational culture, and informal institutions, from which a mechanism-based conceptual framework is developed. South Sudan is used as an analytically anchored case rather than a site of primary data collection: governance assessments, civil service policy documents, and peer-reviewed studies relevant to South Sudan are read through the framework to explain how leadership norms, informal recruitment practices, and shared assumptions about merit shape recruitment outcomes through processes of institutional legitimacy and rule interpretation. **Findings:** The review indicates that organizational culture functions as an institutional mechanism that mediates the implementation of formal recruitment rules. While many fragile states formally adopt merit-based recruitment reforms, the reviewed literature suggests that the persistence of informal norms and patronage networks often shapes how these rules are interpreted and enforced in practice. As a result, formal convergence around meritocratic frameworks does not necessarily translate into convergence in recruitment outcomes. **Practical Implications:** The findings suggest that rule-centric public sector reforms alone are insufficient to ensure merit-based recruitment. Reform strategies must address underlying cultural norms, leadership practices, and informal institutional arrangements that influence recruitment decisions in public organizations. **Originality/Value:** This study contributes to the literature by moving beyond descriptive accounts of recruitment reform failure to specify the cultural and in-

stitutional mechanisms through which macro-level reforms translate into micro-level recruitment decisions. The proposed framework is empirically testable and transferable to other fragile and post-conflict governance contexts.

Keywords

Organizational Culture, Merit-Based Recruitment, Institutional Mechanisms, Neo-Patrimonialism, Fragile States, Public Administration

1. Introduction

Merit-based recruitment is widely recognized as a foundational principle of modern public administration because it promotes bureaucratic competence, procedural fairness, and institutional legitimacy. Public sector reform agendas across the world emphasize transparent and competitive recruitment systems as mechanisms for improving government effectiveness and strengthening state capacity. These reforms are premised on the idea that meritocratic recruitment enhances administrative professionalism, reduces corruption, and ensures that public institutions attract competent personnel capable of delivering public services effectively (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2022). Recent empirical studies also show that professionalized recruitment systems are positively associated with improved public sector performance and higher levels of citizen trust in government institutions (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, & Schuster, 2021).

Despite the global diffusion of merit-based recruitment frameworks, evidence from fragile and post-conflict states demonstrates that formal recruitment rules frequently fail to produce meritocratic outcomes. Governance research increasingly shows that recruitment decisions in many developing administrative systems remain strongly influenced by informal political considerations, including patronage networks, ethnic balancing, and elite bargaining arrangements (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017; Kelsall et al., 2022). In such contexts, the co-existence of formal recruitment procedures and informal decision-making practices creates a persistent gap between institutional design and institutional practice. This gap is particularly visible in appointments to senior public sector positions where administrative authority intersects with political power (Grindle, 2023).

Recent scholarship in public administration has increasingly sought to explain why the adoption of formal governance reforms often fails to produce corresponding behavioural change within public institutions. While earlier explanations focused primarily on weak institutional capacity or lack of political will, newer institutional research emphasizes the importance of organizational processes and internal norms in shaping how formal rules are interpreted and implemented (Ocasio, Thornton, & Lounsbury, 2023). Organizational actors do not simply apply rules mechanically; rather, they interpret them through socially embedded mean-

ings, professional norms, and shared assumptions about appropriate administrative behaviour. As a result, formal procedures may be symbolically maintained while actual decision-making practices reflect informal organizational dynamics.

One critical but often underexplored explanation for this divergence lies in the role of organizational culture. Organizational culture refers to the system of shared values, beliefs, and assumptions that shape behaviour within institutions. Research in organizational studies demonstrates that culture influences how individuals interpret rules, define legitimacy, and justify particular actions within organizations (Schein & Schein, 2017; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023). In the context of recruitment, organizational culture can shape how merit principles are understood and applied by defining what constitutes competence, leadership, or trustworthiness within a particular institutional environment.

The influence of organizational culture becomes particularly significant in environments characterized by high levels of discretion and weak institutional enforcement. When formal rules are ambiguous or inconsistently applied, organizational actors rely on shared norms and informal expectations to guide their decisions. Over time, these informal practices can become institutionalized within organizations, shaping how formal policies are enacted in practice (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2024). In public sector organizations, such cultural dynamics often influence personnel management processes, including recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection.

These changing aspects are especially visible in fragile and post-conflict states such as South Sudan. Since achieving independence in 2011, South Sudan has faced persistent governance challenges characterized by political instability, institutional fragility, and limited bureaucratic consolidation. Although formal civil service laws emphasize merit-based recruitment and professional administration, governance assessments consistently report that senior appointments remain heavily influenced by political negotiation, ethnic considerations, and elite accommodation strategies (Kelsall et al., 2022; OECD, 2025). In such environments, recruitment decisions frequently serve broader political functions related to coalition management and conflict stabilization rather than purely administrative objectives.

The persistence of this gap between formal institutional rules and administrative practice highlights the need for deeper theoretical explanations. Rather than focusing solely on structural constraints or political interference, it is necessary to examine the mechanisms through which institutional rules are interpreted and enacted within organizations. Organizational culture provides an important analytical lens for understanding this process because it shapes how actors perceive institutional constraints, interpret formal procedures, and justify deviations from official regulations (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023).

This article addresses this analytical gap by conceptualizing organizational culture as an institutional mechanism linking formal recruitment rules to recruitment outcomes. Specifically, the article develops a theoretical framework integrating organizational culture theory, institutional theory, and neo-patrimonial per-

spectives to explain how cultural norms influence the implementation of merit-based recruitment reforms in fragile governance contexts. By focusing on the interaction between formal institutions and organizational culture, the article contributes to broader debates in public administration concerning why formally similar governance reforms often produce divergent outcomes across institutional environments.

1.1. Key Definitions and Scope

Three terms are used throughout this article and are defined here to keep the unit of analysis consistent. Senior public officials refer to appointees to senior civil service and public agency positions, typically director-level and above, where appointment authority sits with senior political or administrative leadership rather than being fully delegated to line management, and where discretion over selection criteria is consequently highest. Merit-based recruitment denotes recruitment governed by publicly advertised vacancies, competency-based evaluation, protection from political interference, and enforceable accountability mechanisms, consistent with the four-dimension operationalisation set out in Section 3.2.1. Administrative performance refers to the competence, impartiality, and service-delivery effectiveness of the public officials appointed through a given recruitment process, as distinct from broader organisational or sectoral performance measures.

The primary unit of analysis is senior public official appointments. Because the peer-reviewed and grey literature on South Sudan and comparable fragile states rarely disaggregates by seniority, the review also draws on studies of general civil service recruitment where these illustrate mechanisms—cultural mediation, informal-institutional moderation—that the framework argues apply with particular force to senior appointments. Where a cited study concerns general civil service recruitment rather than senior appointments specifically, this is noted in the text.

1.2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives, organizational culture theory, institutional theory, and neo-patrimonialism, to explain how recruitment rules are interpreted and enacted within public sector organizations. Together, these perspectives provide a multi-level analytical framework linking macro-level governance conditions with micro-level organizational behaviour.

Organizational culture theory provides an important starting point for understanding how shared meanings shape behaviour inside institutions. Organizational culture refers to the system of shared values, beliefs, and assumptions that guide how organizational members perceive problems and respond to institutional expectations. According to [Schein and Schein \(2017\)](#), culture operates at multiple levels within organizations, ranging from observable practices to deeply embedded assumptions about authority, competence, and legitimacy. These cul-

tural elements influence how organizational members interpret formal procedures and evaluate appropriate courses of action.

One widely used analytical framework for understanding organizational culture is the layered model developed by Schein, which distinguishes between artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. Artifacts represent visible organizational practices such as recruitment procedures, appointment memos, or selection committees. Espoused values refer to formally articulated principles such as professionalism, transparency, and meritocracy that are often expressed in policy documents and organizational mission statements. However, the deepest level of culture, basic assumptions, consists of taken-for-granted beliefs about authority, trust, and leadership that shape behaviour within organizations (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023). These underlying assumptions often exert the strongest influence in situations where formal rules provide limited guidance.

Institutional theory extends this analysis by examining how formal rules and informal norms interact within organizations. Institutional scholars distinguish between formal institutions, including laws and regulations, and informal institutions, such as social norms and shared expectations that guide behaviour in practice (North, 1990; Hodgson, 2024). Importantly, institutional theory emphasizes that the effects of formal rules depend on how actors interpret and enact them within organizational contexts. Institutions therefore operate not only through formal enforcement mechanisms but also through socially constructed meanings that shape behaviour (Ocasio, Thornton, & Lounsbury, 2023).

In fragile governance contexts, the coexistence of formal and informal institutions often produces what scholars describe as institutional dualism. Under such conditions, formal bureaucratic structures may coexist with informal governance arrangements that exercise significant influence over decision-making processes. Public officials may therefore navigate multiple institutional logics simultaneously, balancing the expectations of formal administrative rules with informal political or social obligations (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2024). This dynamic helps explain why formal recruitment reforms may be adopted without fundamentally altering underlying administrative practices.

Neo-patrimonial theory provides a contextual perspective for understanding how these dynamics operate in many fragile and post-conflict states. Neo-patrimonial governance systems combine formal bureaucratic institutions with personalized networks of authority and patron-client relationships. In such systems, public office often functions as a resource for maintaining political alliances, distributing patronage, and securing loyalty among political actors (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Kelsall et al., 2022). Consequently, recruitment decisions frequently reflect broader political considerations rather than purely administrative criteria.

These governance dynamics influence organizational cultures by embedding expectations about leadership, loyalty, and competence within public institutions. In neo-patrimonial environments, attributes such as political reliability, ethnic

representation, and personal trust may be viewed as legitimate components of leadership competence. As a result, recruitment practices that deviate from formal meritocratic procedures may still be perceived as rational and legitimate responses to the political realities of governance (Grindle, 2023).

Through these theoretical perspectives, this article conceptualizes organizational culture as a mechanism linking macro-level governance structures to micro-level recruitment decisions. Organizational culture shapes how actors interpret recruitment rules, determines which practices are considered legitimate within organizations, and provides informal guidance for behaviour when formal enforcement mechanisms are weak. In fragile governance situations, these cultural mechanisms play a crucial role in explaining why merit-based recruitment reforms often fail to produce expected administrative outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Merit-Based Recruitment and Public Sector Performance

Merit-based recruitment is widely regarded as a cornerstone of effective public administration. Rooted in Weberian bureaucratic theory, meritocratic recruitment systems aim to ensure that public officials are selected based on qualifications, competence, and professional experience rather than political or personal affiliations. Such systems are considered essential for building professional bureaucracies capable of delivering public services efficiently and maintaining public trust in government institutions. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that meritocratic recruitment systems are associated with improved governance outcomes, including reduced corruption, stronger institutional capacity, and better public service performance (Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024; Minja, 2024).

Recent empirical studies have reinforced the importance of merit-based recruitment in strengthening administrative effectiveness. Research examining public sector human resource management systems shows that recruitment processes that prioritize competency-based selection and transparent evaluation procedures significantly enhance organizational performance and workforce quality. For example, a study examining recruitment strategies in government institutions found that well-designed recruitment systems improve workforce stability, employee motivation, and service delivery outcomes (Nzimande et al., 2025). These findings suggest that meritocratic recruitment practices are a critical component of effective governance systems.

The broader literature also highlights the role of recruitment systems in shaping broader societal outcomes. Studies examining the relationship between civil service recruitment systems and governance indicators show that meritocratic recruitment reduces political corruption and strengthens institutional integrity. Research analysing civil service organization across countries demonstrates that recruitment systems based on professional qualifications rather than patronage contribute to lower corruption levels and improved social outcomes, including better population health indicators (Dahlström et al., 2012). These findings illustrate the

broader governance implications of recruitment systems beyond internal administrative performance.

However, despite the recognized benefits of meritocratic recruitment systems, many public sector institutions continue to struggle with the effective implementation of merit-based recruitment practices. Research across developing countries demonstrates that recruitment processes are often influenced by political patronage, personal networks, and informal institutional arrangements. These dynamics frequently result in the coexistence of formal meritocratic rules and informal recruitment practices that shape actual appointment outcomes.

Recruitment Practices in Developing and Fragile Governance Contexts

The implementation of merit-based recruitment systems is particularly challenging in fragile governance environments. In many developing countries, formal administrative institutions coexist with informal political networks that influence recruitment decisions. Public sector appointments may therefore reflect broader political considerations such as ethnic balancing, coalition management, or elite accommodation.

Studies examining recruitment practices in African public sector institutions illustrate the persistence of these challenges. Research on recruitment practices in government institutions in South Africa found that although formal recruitment procedures emphasize merit-based selection, the actual implementation of these procedures is often constrained by bureaucratic inertia, inconsistent policy implementation, and informal decision-making networks (Nzimande et al., 2025). Similar findings have been reported in other African governance contexts, where recruitment decisions are influenced by political actors and informal institutional dynamics.

Evidence from Uganda further illustrates the challenges of implementing merit-based recruitment systems in developing governance contexts. A study examining recruitment practices in district local governments found that political influence and informal networks frequently undermine merit-based recruitment procedures. The study concluded that recruitment decisions were often shaped by influence-peddling and political pressure from local leaders, resulting in the appointment of candidates who may not necessarily meet formal merit criteria (Ocwer, Okuna, & Mwesigwa, 2024). These findings highlight the complex interaction between formal administrative rules and informal political dynamics in shaping recruitment outcomes.

Organizational Culture and Administrative Decision-Making

One important factor influencing recruitment outcomes in public sector institutions is organizational culture. Organizational culture refers to the shared values, norms, and assumptions that shape behaviour within institutions. These cultural elements influence how organizational members interpret rules, evaluate decisions, and determine what actions are considered legitimate within a particular institutional environment.

Recent research emphasizes that organizational culture plays a critical role in

shaping administrative behaviour within public institutions. Studies examining human resource practices in government organizations demonstrate that cultural factors such as leadership expectations, institutional values, and shared beliefs about authority significantly influence employee behaviour and decision-making processes (Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024). Organizational culture therefore shapes how recruitment rules are interpreted and implemented by influencing how decision-makers perceive merit, competence, and leadership.

Within recruitment processes, organizational culture can shape how merit principles are interpreted and applied. Recruitment decisions often involve discretionary judgement, particularly when evaluating leadership potential or organizational fit. In such situations, decision-makers frequently rely on informal norms and shared assumptions to guide their choices. These cultural expectations may influence which candidate attributes are prioritized during recruitment processes.

For example, research examining hiring practices in organizations shows that recruitment decisions frequently involve balancing merit-based considerations with other factors such as loyalty, organizational fit, and internal networks (Hakiki, 2025). Such dynamics illustrate how organizational culture can shape recruitment outcomes by influencing how decision-makers evaluate candidate suitability.

Informal Institutions and Hybrid Recruitment Systems

The interaction between formal institutions and informal governance practices has become a central theme in contemporary public administration research. Institutional scholars emphasize that formal rules do not automatically determine behaviour; rather, they operate within broader institutional environments that include informal norms, political networks, and cultural expectations.

In many developing governance contexts, this interaction produces hybrid institutional systems in which formal bureaucratic rules coexist with informal governance arrangements. Public officials may therefore navigate multiple institutional logics simultaneously, balancing the expectations of formal administrative rules with informal political or social obligations.

Research examining public sector recruitment systems demonstrates that such hybrid arrangements are common in many governance contexts. Comparative studies of recruitment systems show that governments often combine meritocratic procedures with political considerations in order to maintain political stability and represent diverse social groups within public institutions (Jahija, 2025). These hybrid systems reflect the practical realities of governance in complex political environments.

Organizational Culture as an Institutional Mechanism

Although the literature on public sector recruitment and governance reforms has expanded significantly in recent years, relatively limited attention has been given to the mechanisms through which organizational culture mediates the relationship between institutional rules and recruitment outcomes. Many existing studies focus primarily on structural explanations such as political interference or institutional capacity constraints.

However, understanding how institutional rules are interpreted within organizations requires examining internal organizational dynamics. Organizational culture shapes how actors perceive legitimacy, interpret procedural requirements, and justify particular decisions. In recruitment processes, these cultural mechanisms influence how decision-makers evaluate candidate qualifications and interpret merit criteria.

Consequently, examining organizational culture as an institutional mechanism provides an important contribution to the broader literature on governance reform. By focusing on the interpretive processes through which rules are translated into administrative practice, this perspective helps explain why formal recruitment reforms often fail to produce expected outcomes in fragile governance contexts.

The contemporary literature converges on several critical views relevant to public administration reform in fragile states such as South Sudan. First, while merit-based recruitment is widely accepted as a hallmark of effective bureaucratic systems, its implementation is deeply contingent on institutional capacity, political conditions, and organizational culture. Second, organizational culture matters: without shifts in dominant norms and practices, formal HRM reforms struggle to penetrate entrenched bureaucratic behaviors. Third, informal institutions, particularly neopatrimonial networks and patron-client systems, fundamentally shape reform trajectories, often undermining formal regulatory frameworks and producing persistent governance failures.

These views suggest that achieving sustained merit-based recruitment reforms in contexts like South Sudan will require integrated strategies that go beyond procedural mandates. Strengthening accountability mechanisms, fostering cultural change within public institutions, and addressing the structural power of informal networks are central to breaking cycles of reform failure. Future sections of this manuscript will build on these findings to articulate a conceptual framework and propositions that link formal HRM reforms with cultural and institutional dynamics in fragile governance contexts.

3. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

This section operationalises the three key constructs identified in the theoretical and literature review, merit-based recruitment (MR), organisational culture, and informal institutions, into a coherent, integrated analytical framework. The framework explains how these constructs interact to shape public administration reform outcomes in fragile governance settings, and derives three empirically testable propositions from the proposed relational pathways.

3.1. Framework Overview and Theoretical Grounding

The proposed framework is informed by the convergence of three complementary theoretical traditions reviewed in Section 2: organisational culture theory, institutional theory, and neo-patrimonial perspectives. Together, these traditions direct analytical attention to three distinct but interdependent levels of explanation—the

procedural level of formal rules, the organisational level of shared norms and values, and the political economy level of informal power structures. The framework argues that none of these levels is sufficient on its own to explain recruitment outcomes; rather, it is their interaction that determines whether formal merit-based procedures produce the administrative performance outcomes they are designed to achieve.

At its core, the framework posits that the impact of merit-based recruitment on administrative performance is neither direct nor unconditional. Organisational culture serves as a mediating variable, conditioning how formal recruitment rules are interpreted, enacted, and internalised by administrative actors. Informal institutions, in turn, operate as a moderating variable, strengthening or weakening both the direct effect of MR procedures and the capacity of organisational culture to reinforce meritocratic norms. This three-level model moves beyond proceduralist accounts of recruitment reform by specifying the cultural and institutional mechanisms through which macro-level governance designs translate, or fail to translate, into micro-level administrative behaviour.

3.2. Core Constructs

3.2.1. Merit-Based Recruitment

Merit-based recruitment is conceptualised as a formalised set of procedures and criteria that prioritise competence, qualifications, and professional experience in public sector hiring decisions, consistent with Weberian bureaucratic principles and contemporary civil service reform standards (SIGMA, 2023). Empirically, MR is operationalised along four dimensions: procedural transparency (publicly advertised vacancies and documented selection criteria); competency-based evaluation (standardised testing and structured assessment); protection from political interference (civil service commission independence and formal appeal mechanisms); and accountability (sanctions for non-compliance and audit trails). Stronger institutionalisation across these dimensions is expected to produce higher administrative competence, reduced patronage in hiring, and improved service delivery performance (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2022).

3.2.2. Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is defined as the system of shared values, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions that shape how civil servants perceive, interpret, and respond to formal institutional requirements within their organisations (Schein & Schein, 2017). Following Schein's layered model, organisational culture is understood to operate across three levels: observable artefacts (visible practices such as how recruitment panels are convened); espoused values (formally articulated principles such as transparency and professionalism stated in policy documents); and basic assumptions (deeply embedded beliefs about authority, competence, and legitimate leadership that govern actual decision-making behaviour). It is particularly at the level of basic assumptions that organisational culture most powerfully mediates the enactment of formal recruitment procedures, especially in contexts

where formal enforcement is weak or inconsistent (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023).

In the framework, organisational culture is positioned as a mediating variable. A professional culture, characterised by accountability norms, ethical conduct, and openness to procedural compliance, is expected to amplify the performance effects of MR reforms by ensuring that formal rules are internalised rather than merely formally observed. Conversely, a patronage-oriented culture, characterised by loyalty expectations, hierarchical deference, and normalised informality, is expected to attenuate reform effects by generating surface compliance while sustaining informal decision-making dynamics.

3.2.3. Informal Institutions

Informal institutions are defined as persistent social norms, relational networks, and discretionary practices that operate outside formal statute but actively govern administrative behaviour (North, 1990; Hodgson, 2024). In the South Sudanese context, relevant informal institutions include clan-based appointment networks, ethnic balancing expectations in senior hiring decisions, patron-client loyalty obligations, and neo-patrimonial arrangements in which public office serves coalition management functions rather than purely administrative ones (Kelsall et al., 2022). These informal arrangements are not merely residual or transitional; they are adaptive, evolving in response to formal reform pressures while preserving their capacity to shape appointment outcomes.

In the framework, informal institutional strength functions as a moderating variable. Where informal institutions are strong relative to formal enforcement, they constrain both the direct effect of MR procedures (by enabling informal bypassing of formal criteria) and the mediating role of organisational culture (by embedding expectations that override professional norms). Where informal institutions are comparatively weaker, or where formal accountability mechanisms are sufficiently robust to contain them, the mediating role of organisational culture becomes more decisive in determining recruitment outcomes.

3.2.4. Distinguishing Organisational Culture from Informal Institutions

Because the two constructs are easily conflated in practice, it is worth stating explicitly what belongs to each and how each would be observed. Organisational culture is internal to the organisation: it consists of the shared values, espoused principles, and basic assumptions that civil servants within a given ministry or agency hold about authority, competence, and legitimate conduct. It would be observed through artefacts such as how recruitment panels are convened and documented, through espoused values stated in internal policy and mission documents, and, less directly, through patterns of procedural fidelity across administrative units with the same formal rules. Informal institutions are external to any single organisation: they are society-wide or political-settlement-level norms and networks—clan-based appointment networks, patron-client obligations, ethnic balancing expectations—that operate across ministries and agencies regardless of any one unit's internal culture. They would be observed through appointment

patterns that track kinship, ethnic, or political-network ties rather than institutional affiliation, and through the persistence of such patterns across administrative units with otherwise divergent internal cultures. In the framework, this distinction is what separates a mediating variable (culture, which conditions how a given organisation enacts formal rules) from a moderating variable (informal institutions, which constrain the reach of both formal rules and organisational culture from outside the organisation).

3.3. Relational Pathways

The conceptual framework specifies three interrelated pathways through which the core constructs interact to shape administrative performance outcomes. These are summarised in **Table 1** and elaborated below.

Table 1. Summary of conceptual framework pathways.

Pathway	Key Construct	Expected Effect
1. Direct MR Effect	Formal merit-based recruitment strength	↑ Administrative competence, impartiality, and service delivery effectiveness
2. Cultural Mediation	Organisational culture (professional vs. patronage-oriented)	Amplifies or attenuates MR effects on administrative performance
3. Informal Constraint Moderation	Informal institutional strength (patronage networks, neo-patrimonial ties)	Weakens both direct MR effects and cultural mediation when strong

Pathway 1—Direct MR Effect: Formal merit-based recruitment procedures exert a direct positive effect on administrative performance by increasing the probability that competent, professionally qualified candidates occupy civil service positions. This pathway operates through the procedural mechanisms of competitive selection, standardised competency assessment, and independent oversight, which together reduce the scope for politically motivated appointments and increase workforce quality (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, & Schuster, 2021).

Pathway 2—Cultural Mediation: Organisational culture mediates the relationship between MR institutionalisation and administrative performance. Formal procedures create the structural conditions for meritocratic recruitment, but it is organisational culture that determines whether civil servants and administrative leaders interpret, apply, and internalise these conditions in practice. Professional cultures reinforce formal rules through shared expectations that legitimate competency-based selection; patronage cultures undermine them by sustaining shared expectations that legitimate informal appointment practices (Schein & Schein, 2017; Ocasio, Thornton, & Lounsbury, 2023).

Pathway 3—Informal Institutional Moderation: Informal institutions moderate both the direct effect of MR procedures and the mediating role of organisa-

tional culture. In governance contexts where patronage networks, neo-patrimonial arrangements, and clan-based obligations are structurally embedded, formal recruitment procedures may be nominally adopted while informal institutional logics continue to govern actual appointment decisions. Under these conditions, even professional organisational cultures may be insufficient to counteract the structural pull of informal institutional demands, particularly for senior appointments where political stakes are highest (Kelsall et al., 2022; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2024).

3.4. Framework Diagram

Figure 1 illustrates the full conceptual framework. Merit-based recruitment (independent variable) exerts a direct positive effect on administrative performance outcomes (dependent variable), indicated by Path A. Organisational culture (mediating variable) conditions this relationship: Path B captures the effect of MR strength on organisational culture, and Path C captures the effect of culture on performance, together constituting the mediation pathway. Informal institutional strength (moderating variable) moderates both Path A and Path C, indicated by the dashed interaction arrows in the figure, weakening both the direct MR effect and the cultural mediation pathway as informal institutional power increases.

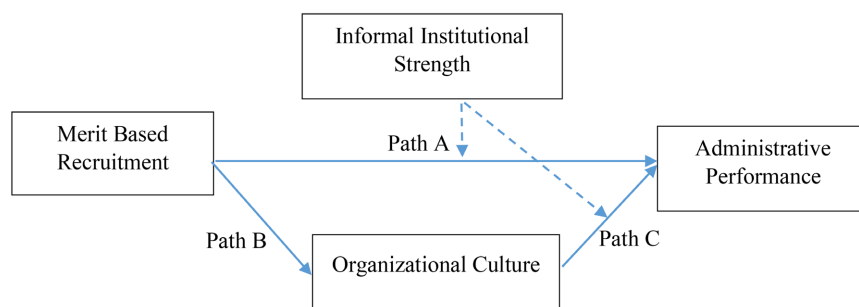


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework—Merit-Based Recruitment, Organisational Culture, Informal Institutions, and Administrative Performance (South Sudan).

3.5. Propositions

Three propositions for empirical testing are derived directly from the framework pathways. Each proposition is theoretically grounded and, collectively, they constitute a testable mid-range theory of merit-based recruitment in fragile governance contexts.

Proposition 1 (Direct MR Effect): *Public organisations with more thoroughly institutionalised merit-based recruitment procedures exhibit higher levels of administrative competence, impartiality, and service delivery effectiveness than organisations where such procedures are weak or inconsistently enforced. This effect operates through procedural mechanisms of competitive selection, competency assessment, and independent oversight that reduce the probability of politically motivated appointments.*

This proposition aligns with empirical evidence demonstrating that meritocratic recruitment systems are positively associated with reduced corruption, stronger institutional capacity, and improved governance outcomes (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Dahlström et al., 2012). In South Sudan, where formal civil service frameworks exist but enforcement is uneven, variance in MR institutionalisation across ministries provides a tractable analytical lever for testing this relationship.

Proposition 2 (Cultural Mediation): *The effects of merit-based recruitment on administrative performance are mediated by organisational culture. MR reforms are more effective in administrative units where prevailing cultures prioritise professionalism, accountability, and ethical conduct, and less effective in units where cultures normalise patronage expectations, hierarchical deference, and resistance to formal procedural compliance.*

This proposition draws on institutional and organisational culture theory demonstrating that formal rules are interpreted through socially embedded meanings within organisations (Schein & Schein, 2017; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023; Ocasio, Thornton, & Lounsbury, 2023). In the South Sudanese context, where administrative units differ markedly in their internal cultural orientation, ranging from relatively professionalised technical ministries to politically dominated appointment environments, culture is expected to generate significant heterogeneity in reform outcomes across structurally comparable units.

Proposition 3 (Informal Institutional Moderation): *In governance contexts where informal institutions, including patronage networks, neo-patrimonial obligations, and clan-based appointment norms, are structurally strong, the effectiveness of merit-based recruitment and its cultural mediation pathway are significantly weakened. Formal procedural compliance and informal appointment practices co-exist as a hybrid institutional arrangement, producing implementation gaps that persist even where organisational culture is comparatively professional.*

This proposition is grounded in neo-patrimonial governance theory and institutional dualism scholarship (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Kelsall et al., 2022; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2024), which demonstrate that informal institutions in fragile states are adaptive rather than merely resistant, evolving to co-exist with formal reforms without surrendering their capacity to shape appointment outcomes. The moderating effect of informal institutional strength is expected to be particularly pronounced for senior public sector appointments, where political stakes and patronage incentives are highest.

Taken together, these three propositions constitute an integrated, multi-level theory of merit-based recruitment in fragile states. Proposition 1 addresses the structural prerequisites of reform effectiveness; Proposition 2 addresses the organisational conditions under which those structural prerequisites are translated into practice; and Proposition 3 addresses the political economy constraints that limit the scope of both. The subsequent methodology section specifies how these propositions were operationalised and tested empirically within the South Sudanese administrative context.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Review Orientation

This study adopted a systematic literature review design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, in order to ensure transparency, methodological rigour, and replicability in synthesising theoretical and empirical scholarship on merit-based recruitment, organisational culture, and informal institutions in fragile state governance (Moher et al., 2009). Systematic review methods are particularly appropriate for consolidating fragmented and interdisciplinary evidence, allowing for explicit documentation of search strategies, inclusion criteria, and analytical procedures that reduce the selection bias commonly associated with narrative reviews (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). In the context of public administration reform research, where findings are dispersed across governance studies, organisational theory, and development economics, a PRISMA-guided approach strengthened the credibility and cumulative value of the synthesis.

Although the review encompasses comparative governance literature, South Sudan was incorporated as an analytically anchored case rather than as a site of primary data collection. South Sudan functioned as a contextual lens through which broader patterns identified in the fragile state and civil service reform literature were interpreted, drawing on governance assessments, civil service policy documents, and peer-reviewed studies relevant to post-conflict public administration in sub-Saharan Africa (OECD, 2025; Chen et al., 2026). Case-anchored approaches of this kind are well established in development governance research, where institutional dynamics vary substantially across subnational and political contexts, enabling the integration of generalisable theoretical insights with place-specific administrative realities (George & Bennett, 2005). This strategy allowed the review to remain systematic in design while remaining sensitive to the distinctive governance conditions of South Sudan.

The primary objective of the review was not to establish causal relationships between merit-based recruitment and administrative performance, but to identify recurrent mechanisms, mediating conditions, and political-institutional configurations that shape how formal recruitment reforms interact with organisational culture and informal institutions in fragile governance settings. Systematic reviews are particularly effective for tracing such mechanisms across diverse empirical contexts, especially where causal inference is constrained by heterogeneous study designs and data sources (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2017). By focusing on mechanisms rather than effect sizes, the study aligned with interpretive and governance-oriented traditions in public administration research that prioritise theoretical depth over statistical generalisation.

4.2. Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across four major academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, to capture interdis-

disciplinary scholarship spanning public administration, organisational studies, institutional theory, and development governance (Bramer & Bain, 2017). These databases were selected because they index both high-impact peer-reviewed journals and regionally relevant scholarship that is frequently underrepresented in single-discipline searches. The search covered studies published between 2000 and 2025, reflecting the period during which merit-based recruitment became a dominant normative construct in civil service reform discourse and neo-patrimonial governance analysis gained analytical traction in fragile state research (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Rauch & Evans, 2000). Limiting the temporal scope in this way ensured conceptual coherence while allowing for the inclusion of recent governance and institutional theory contributions.

Search strings combined key terms using Boolean operators, including:

- “merit-based recruitment” AND “public sector” OR “civil service”
- “organisational culture” AND “public administration” OR “HRM reform”
- “informal institutions” OR “neo-patrimonialism” AND “fragile states”
- “South Sudan” OR “post-conflict governance” AND “civil service”
- “recruitment reform” AND “sub-Saharan Africa” OR “developing countries”

In addition to database searches, backward and forward citation tracking was employed to identify influential studies not captured through keyword retrieval alone (Hirt et al., 2023). Reference lists of highly cited theoretical and empirical articles were manually screened to locate additional sources, consistent with systematic citation searching procedures that enhance literature coverage beyond database retrieval (Briscoe et al., 2020). Grey literature, including governance assessments from the OECD, SIGMA monitoring reports, civil service commission frameworks, and reports from international development agencies, was additionally examined to situate scholarly findings within contemporary policy and planning contexts. Such sources provide policy-relevant evidence not typically indexed in academic databases and are particularly important for fragile state governance research, where peer-reviewed empirical studies remain limited (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

4.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria:

- 1) Published between 2000 and 2025;
- 2) Focused on merit-based recruitment, organisational culture, or informal institutions as central analytical constructs;
- 3) Examined governance, administrative, or institutional outcomes at the organisational, sectoral, or national level;
- 4) Were empirically grounded (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) or provided substantive theoretical contributions relevant to public administration in fragile, post-conflict, or developing governance contexts; and
- 5) Offered insights applicable to civil service reform, organisational culture change, or informal institutional dynamics in South Sudan or analytically compa-

rable governance environments.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Used the terms “merit-based recruitment” or “organisational culture” only tangentially, without substantive analytical engagement;
- Focused exclusively on private sector HRM without relevance to public administration contexts;
- Were purely descriptive policy opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical grounding; or
- Were inaccessible in full text.

The 2000–2025 window applied to the 68 studies that constituted the systematic search corpus and are synthesised in Section 5. A small number of foundational theoretical works published before 2000 (e.g., North, 1990; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Manor, 1999) were cited outside this corpus, in the Theoretical Underpinnings and Discussion sections, to ground the institutional-theory and neo-patrimonialism constructs on which the review’s analytical framework is built. These works were treated as conceptual foundations rather than as included studies, consistent with standard systematic review practice of citing seminal theory published before the search window.

4.4. PRISMA Screening and Selection Process

The database and grey-literature search was conducted between January and March 2026. The initial database search yielded approximately 380 records. After removing duplicates, 291 records remained for title and abstract screening. At this stage, studies clearly unrelated to merit-based recruitment, organisational culture, or fragile state governance were excluded, resulting in 148 articles subjected to full-text review. Following full-text screening against the inclusion criteria, 68 studies were retained for final synthesis. These comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, working papers, and high-quality policy and governance reports. Title and abstract screening, full-text screening, and data extraction were conducted by the author as sole reviewer; this single-reviewer design is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 8.4, since dual independent screening was not feasible within the scope of this study. The PRISMA process, identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, was documented throughout to ensure transparency and replicability of the review process.

4.5. Quality Appraisal

To enhance analytical rigour, all included empirical studies were subjected to a basic quality appraisal using an adapted version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018), supplemented by narrative-review criteria for purely theoretical and conceptual contributions that fall outside the MMAT’s scope. Quantitative studies were assessed for clarity of research design, appropriateness of statistical methods, and robustness of construct measurement. Qualitative studies were evaluated based on transparency of data collection procedures,

analytical depth, and reflexivity. Mixed-methods studies were assessed for coherence between qualitative and quantitative components and the integrity of triangulation procedures. Theoretical and conceptual contributions were appraised for internal logical consistency, engagement with competing perspectives, and applicability to the South Sudanese governance context.

Rather than excluding studies solely on the basis of methodological limitations, quality appraisal was used to weight evidence during synthesis, according greater interpretive emphasis to studies with stronger designs, clearer theoretical grounding, and more direct relevance to the analytical framework. Studies with significant methodological limitations were retained where they offered unique contextual evidence not available from higher-quality sources, particularly for the South Sudan case where peer-reviewed empirical literature remains sparse.

4.6. Data Extraction and Analytical Strategy

A structured data extraction matrix was used to capture: study context and objectives; theoretical or methodological approach; key constructs examined (merit-based recruitment, organisational culture, informal institutions, or combinations thereof); principal findings on governance, administrative, or institutional outcomes; and relevance to South Sudan or analytically comparable fragile state contexts.

Thematic synthesis was conducted following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) framework, combining inductive coding of extracted findings with theory-driven categorisation anchored in the three theoretical traditions reviewed in Section 2, organisational culture theory, institutional theory, and neo-patrimonialism. Findings were organised under four analytical domains: the institutional conditions of formal merit-based recruitment; the mediating role of organisational culture; the moderating force of informal institutions; and cross-cutting structural constraints. Within each domain, attention was given to both enabling mechanisms and limiting dynamics, particularly those relating to political interference, elite capture, and governance capacity deficits. The full data extraction matrix and the reference list of all 68 included studies are summarised in Appendix A and are available from the author on request.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the theoretical synthesis and conceptual analysis conducted in Sections 2 through 3. Because this study adopted a conceptual and theory-building orientation grounded in a systematic engagement with the public administration, organisational culture, and fragile state governance literatures, findings were presented as theoretically derived analytical conclusions rather than empirical results from primary data collection. These findings were organised under four domains corresponding to the conceptual framework: the institutional conditions of merit-based recruitment; the mediating role of organisational culture; the moderating force of informal institutions; and cross-cut-

ting structural constraints. Each domain is synthesised from the convergent evidence reviewed in the preceding sections and directly informs the propositions advanced in Section 3.

5.1. Institutional Conditions of Merit-Based Recruitment in Fragile States

The first domain of findings concerns the structural conditions under which formal merit-based recruitment systems operate in fragile governance contexts. The theoretical and empirical literature reviewed consistently demonstrates that meritocratic recruitment is positively associated with administrative competence, reduced political corruption, and improved service delivery outcomes across a wide range of governance environments (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Dahlström et al., 2012; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2022). However, these associations are substantially conditioned by the institutional architecture within which formal recruitment procedures are embedded.

In South Sudan, statutory civil service frameworks formally prescribe merit-based criteria for recruitment and appointment, including provisions for open competition, competency-based selection, and civil service commission oversight. However, governance assessments and empirical analyses consistently indicate that these frameworks are thinly institutionalised: oversight bodies lack financial and operational independence; vacancy advertisement and competency testing are applied inconsistently across administrative units; and sanction mechanisms for non-compliance are rarely invoked (SIGMA, 2023; Chen et al., 2026; OECD, 2025). The result is a systematic implementation gap in which formal rules exist but do not reliably govern actual appointment decisions.

Finding 1: The reviewed literature indicates that formal merit-based recruitment frameworks in South Sudan are thinly institutionalised, generating procedural compliance on paper but insufficient enforcement infrastructure to translate formal rules into consistent appointment practice. This implementation gap appears structural rather than incidental, reflecting the limited autonomy, resources, and political protection available to formal oversight mechanisms.

This finding is consistent with the broader literature on governance reform in fragile states, which identifies a recurring pattern of formal institutional convergence, the adoption of internationally recognised reform frameworks, without corresponding convergence in institutional practice (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2017). The coexistence of formal meritocratic frameworks with informal appointment practices produces what the institutional theory literature describes as institutional dualism: a condition in which two parallel institutional logics operate simultaneously, with formal rules providing a public accountability script while informal norms govern actual decision-making.

5.2. Organisational Culture as a Mediating Mechanism

The second domain of findings concerns the role of organisational culture in me-

diating the relationship between formal MR procedures and administrative performance outcomes. Drawing on organisational culture theory (Schein & Schein, 2017; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2023) and the public administration literature on culture and HRM reform (Tadesse Bogale & Debelo, 2024; Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025; Asiimwe et al., 2025), the analysis identifies organisational culture as the critical internal mechanism through which formal recruitment rules acquire, or fail to acquire, behavioural force.

The evidence converges on a consistent pattern: administrative units in which professional norms, ethical conduct, and accountability orientation are dominant exhibit higher fidelity to formal recruitment procedures, even in contexts where enforcement infrastructure is weak. In such units, meritocratic behaviour is sustained by shared organisational expectations rather than by formal sanction alone. Conversely, units in which patronage expectations, loyalty-based authority relations, and resistance to transparency are culturally normalised exhibit lower procedural fidelity, even when formal rules are clearly specified and nominally enforced.

This mediation effect is particularly consequential for senior appointments, where formal procedures grant the greatest discretion and where informal cultural expectations exert the most direct influence over decision-making. In South Sudan, where senior appointments frequently intersect with coalition management and ethnic balancing imperatives, the cultural orientation of appointing authorities represents a critical determinant of whether formal merit criteria govern selection outcomes or serve merely as post-hoc justifications for informally predetermined decisions.

Finding 2: The review suggests that organisational culture mediates the implementation of formal merit-based recruitment rules by shaping how administrative actors interpret procedural requirements and evaluate candidate suitability. Professional cultures appear to amplify the behavioural effects of MR frameworks, while patronage-oriented cultures are associated with symbolic compliance alongside continued informal appointment practices. This mediation effect appears most pronounced for senior appointments, where discretion is highest and informal cultural expectations are most influential.

5.3. Informal Institutions as a Structural Moderator

The third domain of findings addresses the moderating influence of informal institutions on both the direct effect of MR procedures and the cultural mediation pathway. Neo-patrimonial governance theory (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Kelsall et al., 2022) and institutional theory (North, 1990; Hodgson, 2024; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2024) converge in establishing that informal institutions in fragile states are not simply pre-modern residues awaiting displacement by formal governance reforms. Rather, they are adaptive institutional arrangements that co-evolve with formal rules, developing strategies to formally accommodate reform requirements while preserving their capacity to shape substantive outcomes.

In South Sudan, clan-based appointment networks, patron-client loyalty obli-

gations, and ethnic representation expectations embedded in political settlements constitute a structurally robust informal institutional environment that constrains the operation of formal civil service procedures (Kelsall et al., 2022; OECD, 2025). Critically, these informal institutions do not simply resist formal MR reforms; they adapt to formally co-exist with them, producing hybrid governance outcomes in which formal vacancy processes are observed while actual selection outcomes are pre-shaped by informal networks. This adaptation renders informal institutional influence particularly difficult to detect through formal compliance monitoring alone.

Finding 3: The literature indicates that informal institutions in the South Sudanese governance context are structurally adaptive rather than simply resistant. They appear to co-evolve with formal merit-based recruitment reforms, producing hybrid institutional arrangements in which procedural compliance and patronage-based practice operate simultaneously. The strength of informal institutions appears to weaken both the direct effectiveness of formal MR procedures and the capacity of professional organisational cultures to sustain meritocratic norms, particularly for senior and politically salient appointments.

The moderating effect of informal institutional strength is expected to be non-linear: above a threshold level of informal institutional embeddedness, formal MR procedures and professional culture norms may be insufficient, on their own, to override informal appointment dynamics. This implies that reform strategies targeting procedural and cultural dimensions alone will reach a ceiling of effectiveness in contexts where informal institutional strength exceeds this threshold.

5.4. Cross-Cutting Structural Constraints

The fourth domain of findings identifies three structural constraints that operate across all three analytical domains, compounding the challenges of MR reform implementation in the South Sudanese context.

5.4.1. The Post-Conflict Political Settlement

South Sudan's governance environment is shaped by a post-conflict political settlement in which senior public appointments serve functions of coalition management and conflict stabilisation that extend well beyond administrative objectives (Kelsall et al., 2022; Bøås & Strazzari, 2020). In such contexts, merit-based recruitment and political appointment perform different institutional functions, and the formal adoption of merit principles does not resolve the underlying political imperative to distribute administrative positions as a mechanism of elite accommodation. This structural constraint is not amenable to resolution through procedural or cultural reform alone; it requires engagement with the broader political economy of governance and peace.

5.4.2. Gendered Dimensions of Informal Exclusion

The literature review reveals a significant gap in analytical attention to the gendered dimensions of informal institutional exclusion in South Sudanese recruit-

ment processes. Women face compound barriers to both formal recruitment processes, including documentation requirements that disadvantage those with interrupted education histories, and informal network access, including clan-based appointment channels that are predominantly male-governed (Grindle, 2023). These gendered exclusions are likely to compound the implementation gaps documented under Findings 1 and 2, and represent an important dimension for empirical investigation in future research.

5.4.3. Capacity Deficits in Civil Service Oversight

Across all three analytical domains, the effectiveness of formal recruitment procedures, cultural change initiatives, and informal institution engagement strategies depends on the operational capacity of civil service oversight bodies. The evidence reviewed consistently indicates that South Sudan's civil service commission and related oversight mechanisms face significant capacity constraints, in terms of technical expertise, financial resources, and political protection, that limit their ability to audit recruitment processes, adjudicate contested appointments, and enforce compliance standards (SIGMA, 2023; OECD, 2025). Capacity building in these oversight functions is therefore a prerequisite for reform effectiveness rather than merely a supplementary priority.

Finding 4: The reviewed evidence suggests that merit-based recruitment reform in South Sudan is constrained by three cross-cutting structural conditions: a post-conflict political settlement that assigns administrative appointments to coalition management functions; gendered informal exclusion mechanisms that compound implementation gaps; and capacity deficits in formal oversight institutions. On this reading, effective reform strategies would need to engage with all three conditions simultaneously rather than targeting procedural dimensions in isolation.

5.5. Synthesis: Towards an Integrated Understanding

The four domains of findings taken together, advance a theoretically coherent and empirically grounded understanding of merit-based recruitment reform in fragile governance contexts. The findings demonstrate that the relationship between formal MR procedures and administrative performance is neither direct nor uniform. It is systematically mediated by organisational culture, which determines whether formal rules acquire behavioural force within administrative units, and moderated by informal institutional strength, which determines the ceiling of effectiveness that procedural and cultural reforms can achieve.

These findings challenge two dominant assumptions in civil service reform practice: first, the proceduralist assumption that the adoption of formal merit rules is sufficient to generate meritocratic outcomes; and second, the cultural determinism assumption that cultural change alone, absent robust enforcement and political economy engagement, can overcome structurally embedded informal institutions. The integrated framework advanced in Section 3 and evidenced in this section argues, instead, that sustained merit-based recruitment reform requires the

simultaneous strengthening of formal procedures, organisational cultures, and informal institutional accountability.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the empirical and theoretical evidence synthesised in the preceding sections, this discussion elaborates the three propositions introduced in Section 3.5 against country-specific and comparative African evidence, and advances two further discussion points that emerge from that evidence but were not anticipated in the original framework. Together these five discussion points explain how merit-based recruitment reforms operate within the institutional, cultural, and informal political economies of fragile states, with particular reference to South Sudan. The discussion foregrounds three core insights: 1) the structural fragility of statutory recruitment reforms in post-conflict administrative environments; 2) the socio-cultural dynamics that actively mediate administrative behaviour; and 3) the resilience and adaptive persistence of informal institutions that redirect or subvert formal policy objectives.

6.1. Reframing Merit-Based Recruitment beyond Proceduralist Assumptions

This study demonstrates that merit-based recruitment reform in South Sudan operates neither as a neutral administrative mechanism nor as a self-executing catalyst for performance improvement. Instead, its effects are politically mediated, institutionally conditioned, and socially differentiated. While dominant strands of public administration literature present formal recruitment procedures as functional complements to weak governance systems (e.g., competency-based selection, open vacancy advertising, and independent oversight), the South Sudanese evidence supports more critical scholarship that situates MR reform within local political economies characterised by fragile institutional authority, elite brokerage, and uneven accountability (Chen et al., 2026; Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024).

Across all three analytical domains, formal procedure, organisational culture, and informal influence, merit-based recruitment enhances administrative capacity and performance primarily, under conditions where institutional incentives align with inclusion, transparency, and procedural enforcement. Where such conditions are absent, formal recruitment frameworks may instead reproduce existing power asymmetries, entrench patronage, or generate procedural compliance without substantive behavioural change. This finding challenges overly optimistic reform narratives that frame merit principles as inherently and automatically developmental in fragile state contexts.

Discussion Point 1 (elaborates Propositions 1 and 3): *In public administration contexts characterised by weak accountability and fragile institutional authority, merit-based recruitment reforms are more likely to reproduce existing power relations than to generate inclusive and performance-enhancing outcomes.*

This proposition aligns with political economy analyses of civil service reform

in post-conflict Africa, which document how formal governance reforms coexist with persistent informal power structures that shape resource allocation, appointment practices, and administrative participation.

6.2. Structural Fragility of Formal Recruitment Reforms

Merit-based recruitment is widely recognised as a normative pillar of effective public administration, intended to promote professionalism, impartiality, and service quality. In South Africa, merit principles are constitutionally enshrined, yet their practical implementation is routinely challenged by political interference, institutional constraints, and competing policy objectives such as employment equity and affirmative action (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). This empirical pattern resonates with broader evidence from African public administration: formal procedural reforms often exist on paper but remain thinly institutionalised, relying on weak monitoring systems, limited accountability mechanisms, and under-resourced implementation infrastructure.

In the South Sudanese context, statutory frameworks for human resource management, including anti-discrimination language and equity objectives, have been formally documented, yet empirical analysis reveals that formal recruitment policies only partially align with observed institutional performance outcomes (Chen et al., 2026). This partial alignment reflects an implementation gap: the existence of rules does not guarantee fidelity to their purpose. Mechanisms established to enforce merit, including vacancy advertising, competency testing, and civil service commissions, often lack the autonomy, resources, or enforcement authority necessary to neutralise political influence or patronage-driven appointments (SIGMA, 2023; Chen et al., 2026; OECD, 2025).

Discussion Point 2 (elaborates Proposition 1): *Where civil service enforcement mechanisms are under-resourced and politically constrained, statutory merit-based recruitment frameworks generate procedural compliance without substantive behavioural change, producing implementation gaps that weaken administrative performance.*

This finding resonates with fragile state governance literature (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Hickey & Mohan, 2004) that cautions against conflating formal institutional existence with institutional effectiveness. In South Sudan, the presence of merit-oriented regulations does not substitute for the organisational conditions required to translate rules into practice.

6.3. Organisational Culture as a Mediator of Reform Outcomes

The literature consistently positions organisational culture as a key mediating variable in the implementation and outcomes of formal recruitment reforms. Culture encompasses the shared beliefs, norms, and behavioural expectations within public institutions that determine how personnel interpret and enact policy mandates. In many public administrations undergoing reform, organisational culture exhibits both path dependency and inertial resistance—meaning long-standing prac-

tices and unexamined norms persist despite procedural change (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025).

Empirical findings from decentralised public sector settings indicate that organisational culture directly influences performance outcomes and interacts with structural reform initiatives. When cultures reinforce professional norms, including accountability, ethical conduct, and citizen-service orientation, merit-based recruitment reforms are more likely to translate into substantive administrative behaviour and improved performance. Conversely, cultures characterised by patronage expectations, hierarchical deference, and resistance to accountability significantly blunt the impact of formal HRM reforms by creating cognitive dissonance between policy expectations and prevailing behavioural norms (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025; Asiimwe et al., 2025).

This cultural mediation explains why merit-based reforms generate heterogeneous outcomes across administratively similar units. Two ministries with comparable formal frameworks may exhibit markedly different recruitment outcomes because their internal cultures range from professionally anchored to informally governed by social networks and relational norms. In post-conflict fragile states such as South Sudan, this dimension is particularly salient, as organisational cultures often absorb pre-existing social structures, including clan affiliations and ethnic identities, that condition everyday administrative interactions.

Discussion Point 3 (elaborates Proposition 2): *Organisational culture mediates the relationship between merit-based recruitment institutionalisation and administrative performance, such that cultures grounded in professional accountability amplify reform effects, while cultures shaped by patronage norms attenuate them.*

6.4. Informal Institutions and the Persistence of Patronage

The interplay between formal recruitment systems and informal institutional dynamics constitutes the third major analytical theme. Informal institutions, defined as persistent social norms, relational networks, and discretionary practices operating outside formal statute, exert pervasive influence on hiring decisions, promotion pathways, and the allocation of bureaucratic resources. Across many African governance systems, informal norms co-exist with formal rules, frequently reshaping or overriding reform intentions (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Hodgson, 2024).

In South Sudan, clan dynamics, patronage networks, and informal political alliances intersect with bureaucratic recruitment in ways that formal procedures cannot easily reach. Critically, these informal institutions are adaptive: they evolve in response to reform pressures and political incentives, rather than simply resisting them. As a result, merit-based procedures may be formally adopted but informally bypassed, with influential actors leveraging social networks to secure appointments irrespective of formal competency criteria. The outcome is a dual institutional reality in which official rules and actual practices diverge substantially, weakening public trust, eroding administrative legitimacy, and diminishing insti-

tutional capacity.

This duality aligns with the concept of institutional hybridisation, wherein formal and informal orders operate in parallel, producing hybrid governance outcomes that neither fully reflect the intentions of formal reformers nor the logic of purely informal social ordering. Reforms that ignore the embedded nature of informal institutions in this context risk superficial adoption with limited substantive impact, a central proposition in fragile state governance literature (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

Discussion Point 4 (elaborates Proposition 3): *In fragile state contexts characterised by weak enforcement, informal institutions do not simply resist merit-based reforms but adapt to formally co-exist with them, producing hybrid governance outcomes in which procedural compliance and patronage-based practice operate simultaneously.*

6.5. Trust Erosion, Exclusion, and the Narrowing of Reform Pathways

A cross-cutting theme emerging across the analytical domains is the erosion of institutional trust, both horizontal (between civil servants and administrative peers) and vertical (between public servants and oversight institutions). Perceived corruption, politically biased appointment practices, and inconsistent procedural enforcement undermine incentives for good-faith engagement with formal merit procedures. When public servants perceive recruitment processes as captured or biased, they retreat into informal network strategies, further limiting the effectiveness of formal procedures and reinforcing the very dynamics that reforms seek to address.

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle: weak institutional trust reduces investment in formal procedural compliance; reduced compliance weakens accountability; weakened accountability further erodes trust. Social exclusion, based on gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, or administrative seniority, compounds this cycle by limiting which actors can effectively participate in either formal or bridging institutional networks.

Discussion Point 5 (extends the framework beyond Section 3.5): *Declining institutional trust shifts administrative behaviour away from formal merit-based engagement toward informal network reliance, narrowing reform pathways and reinforcing cycles of administrative dysfunction in fragile states.*

The combined evidence underscores a multi-level governance challenge: reform outcomes are shaped not only by national legislation but by local administrative cultures and cross-cutting social norms. This implies that research and reform practice must move beyond legalistic proceduralism toward holistic governance strategies that account for the socio-institutional ecosystem of fragile states.

7. Policy and Reform Implications

Drawing on the analytical propositions advanced in the discussion, this section translates empirical and theoretical findings into policy-oriented insights relevant

to public sector leaders, civil service reform agencies, and governance stakeholders in South Sudan and comparable fragile state contexts. The implications are structured around four interrelated reform priorities: strengthening institutional capacity for merit-based HRM; cultivating professional organisational cultures; addressing informal institutional influence; and embedding adaptive learning mechanisms into reform architecture.

7.1. Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Merit-Based HRM

7.1.1. Codifying Transparent Procedures with Enforceable Accountability

A foundational priority is the institutionalisation of merit-based recruitment procedures with clarity, transparency, and enforceable accountability. This requires codifying recruitment processes in public service regulations, standardising documentation for vacancy announcements against competency frameworks, and defining graduated sanction mechanisms for non-compliance. International governance experience consistently demonstrates that formal procedures alone are insufficient without independent oversight bodies empowered to conduct recruitment audits, review contested appointments, and publish compliance reports accessible to civil society (SIGMA, 2023).

Critically, enforcement infrastructure must be adequately resourced to translate mandate into practice. Under-resourced oversight bodies face structural incentives to accommodate rather than challenge political interference, reproducing the implementation gap documented in Section 6.2.

7.1.2. Reinforcing Civil Service Commission Autonomy

Government reforms should reinforce the operational and financial autonomy of civil service commissions and analogous oversight bodies charged with safeguarding recruitment integrity. An institutionally independent commission can insulate merit-based processes from executive interference and provide credible due process for candidates to contest decisions. This institutional autonomy contributes to procedural legitimacy and reduces perceptions of politicization, both of which are foundational in contexts where public trust in administrative institutions is fragile and historically conditioned.

District development plans and national reform frameworks should move beyond rhetorical references to merit principles and explicitly map existing institutional configurations, identifying which oversight mechanisms are functional, which are captured, and which lack the resources to act autonomously (Discussion Point 2).

7.2. Cultivating Professional Organisational Cultures

7.2.1. Leadership-Led Cultural Change Programmes

Organisational culture is not static; it is actively shaped by leadership behaviours, reward structures, and internal communication patterns. Public sector leaders must adopt transformational leadership practices that signal institutional com-

mitment to professionalism, ethical conduct, and citizen-centred service delivery. Leadership development programmes, systematic ethics training, and explicit organisational value frameworks can reinforce cultural norms aligned with meritocratic principles. External technical assistance—from regional governance networks or international development partners—can support the design, implementation, and monitoring of culture change initiatives calibrated to the South Sudanese administrative context.

This implication is particularly relevant given Proposition 3: without deliberate and sustained cultural change strategies, formal recruitment frameworks will continue to generate divergent outcomes across administratively comparable units, depending on the prevailing local culture rather than on the content of formal procedures.

7.2.2. Integrating Merit Adherence into Performance Management Systems

Linking performance evaluations to adherence to merit-based recruitment principles, and, crucially, to the quality of recruitment practice rather than only to service delivery outputs, can incentivise cultural shifts over time. Performance appraisal systems should recognise contributions to organisational learning, adherence to ethical standards, and the integrity of hiring processes as substantive performance dimensions, not procedural afterthoughts. This reframing signals to civil servants that merit-based conduct is institutionally valued and professionally consequential.

7.3. Addressing Informal Institutional Influence

7.3.1. Engaging Local Stakeholders in Reform Dialogue

Because informal institutions are deeply embedded in social structures and reinforced by community-level political economies (Discussion Point 4), reforms that fail to engage local stakeholders risk backlash, co-optation, or silent non-compliance. Structured dialogues with traditional authorities, civil society organisations, professional associations, and community representatives can help anchor merit-based principles within societal expectations. Transparency mechanisms, such as community monitoring of recruitment cycles or civil society scoring of public sector hiring integrity, can reduce opportunities for informal institutional capture without requiring confrontation with entrenched patronage networks.

7.3.2. Harmonising Formal and Informal Norms

Rather than attempting to eradicate informal norms outright, a strategy that is historically ineffective in hybrid governance systems, policymakers should explore targeted integration of positive informal practices that support competence and fairness. Community vetting of recruitment panels, culturally adapted competency frameworks, and locally embedded accountability mechanisms that respect community authority structures while maintaining professional standards could reduce the friction between formal and informal institutional logics. This approach aligns with governance scholarship (Ribot, 2002; Manor, 1999) that ar-

gues decentralisation must be accompanied by realistic engagement with local power dynamics rather than technocratic institutional blueprints.

Decentralisation reforms must therefore be accompanied by realistic assessments of local power dynamics and strengthened institutional checks at district and ministry levels if merit-based procedures are to contribute to equitable development outcomes (Discussion Point 4).

7.4. Embedding Institutional Learning and Adaptive Feedback

7.4.1. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Iterative Reform Cycles

Reform policies must embed monitoring and evaluation systems capable of generating actionable data on recruitment outcomes, cultural shift indicators, and informal practice prevalence over time. Ongoing evaluation allows policymakers to adapt reforms based on evidence, rather than relying on static procedural frameworks designed in contexts that may not reflect evolving ground realities. This adaptive orientation is especially important in fragile state environments, where political and social conditions change rapidly and reform trajectories are frequently disrupted.

Monitoring systems should track not only formal compliance metrics, such as vacancy advertising rates or competency test usage, but also deeper governance quality indicators, including perceived fairness, candidate diversity, and public trust in recruitment processes. The latter indicators are more sensitive to the cultural and informal institutional dynamics identified in Discussion Points 3, 4, and 5.

7.4.2. Regional Knowledge Sharing and Collaborative Learning

Fragmented reform efforts yield limited traction in isolation. South Sudanese policymakers and civil service leaders stand to benefit from structured collaborative learning with peer states facing comparable governance challenges, including Uganda, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, sharing lessons on merit-based HRM implementation, organisational culture change strategies, and the management of formal-informal institutional interactions. Regional governance networks and international development partners can facilitate this exchange through comparative diagnostics, practitioner forums, and cross-national evidence reviews.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Summary of Findings

This study examined the role of merit-based recruitment reforms in shaping public administration outcomes in South Sudan, with particular attention to the mediating influence of organisational culture and the moderating force of informal institutional dynamics. The findings demonstrate that merit-based recruitment, across its formal procedural, cultural, and informal institutional dimensions, plays a significant but inherently ambivalent role in determining administrative performance in fragile state contexts. While formal recruitment frameworks establish necessary procedural foundations, their effectiveness is fundamentally shaped by local political economies, governance quality, organisational culture, and the

adaptive persistence of informal norms.

Formal merit-based recruitment provides necessary procedural architecture but does not, on its own, generate the substantive behavioural change required to improve administrative performance. Its impact is consistently mediated by organisational culture and moderated by the strength of informal institutions that either complement or subvert formal recruitment logic. Organisational culture serves as the critical mediating variable: cultures grounded in professional accountability amplify reform effects, while those embedded in patronage norms and hierarchical deference attenuate them. Informal institutions do not merely resist formal reforms; they adapt to co-exist with them, producing hybrid governance outcomes in which procedural compliance and patronage-based practice operate simultaneously across administrative units. Declining institutional trust creates self-reinforcing cycles that progressively narrow reform pathways, reducing the effective reach of merit-based frameworks over time.

8.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances a politically informed understanding of merit-based recruitment reform, moving beyond proceduralist interpretations to foreground how power, accountability, and informal institutional incentives mediate its developmental effects. By integrating institutional theory, organisational culture scholarship, and fragile state governance frameworks, the study offers a multi-level analytical model for understanding why structurally similar formal recruitment systems produce divergent performance outcomes across administratively comparable units. The three propositions advanced in Section 3.5, together with the two further discussion points developed in Section 6, constitute an empirically grounded mid-range theory of merit-based recruitment in fragile states, with potential applicability to comparable post-conflict and hybrid governance contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

8.3. Practical Implications

Effective reform in South Sudan and similar fragile state contexts must adopt an integrated governance strategy that simultaneously strengthens formal procedures, fosters organisational cultures that internalise meritocratic values, and actively mitigates the distorting influence of informal norms. This composite approach, anchored in enforceable accountability, culturally sensitive leadership development, and engagement with local political economy realities, offers the most viable pathway for translating formal recruitment reforms into tangible improvements in administrative performance, citizen trust, and public sector legitimacy.

District development plans, national civil service frameworks, and international technical assistance programmes should move beyond rhetorical commitments to merit principles and explicitly diagnose existing institutional configurations, identifying which mechanisms are functional, which are captured, and which lack the organisational conditions to act as intended. Without this diagnostic realism, re-

form investments risk reinforcing the very institutional fragilities they seek to address.

8.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study relied on a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review analytically anchored in South Sudan as a primary case, rather than on primary field or administrative data, which limits direct generalisability to other fragile state contexts without additional comparative validation. Screening and data extraction were conducted by a single reviewer, which is a further limitation despite the mitigating quality-appraisal and weighting procedures described in Section 4.5. Future research should combine the analytical framework developed here with primary field or administrative data—including longitudinal ethnographic studies—capable of tracing how merit-based recruitment outcomes evolve over extended reform cycles and across shifting political economy conditions, and, where feasible, dual independent screening. Comparative district-level and cross-national studies would further clarify how variations in informal institutional strength, organisational culture type, and civil service commission autonomy interact to shape recruitment outcomes in different post-conflict governance environments.

Additionally, future work should investigate the gendered dimensions of merit-based recruitment failure in fragile states, an analytical domain underexplored in the current literature but likely to reveal important intersections between informal network exclusion, organisational culture norms, and the structural barriers facing women in South Sudanese public administration.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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