Public Administration in Ethiopia

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Meritocracy, Career Development, and Promotion in Ethiopian Civil Service

Henok Seyoum Assefa

Box 1: Key Points of this chapter
✓ A system that guides the process of recruitment and selection in civil service institutions does exist.
✓ There is a gap with regard to its proper implementation.
✓ The Ethiopian civil service is basically a position-based civil service system.
✓ In practice, Ethiopian civil service is characterized by "mixed" recruitment patterns: competitive written examinations and comparison of the paper qualifications already possessed by the candidate.
✓ Personal connections and nepotism are prevalent in recruitment processes.
✓ Recruitment and appointment of senior civil servants is loosely regulated.

Box 2: Key Insights of this chapter
This chapter intends to discuss meritocracy within the Ethiopian bureaucracy based on empirical data so as to answer the questions to what extent is the Ethiopian civil service characterized by meritocratic recruitment; does it predictable, rewarding long-term careers; and what factors influence meritocratic recruitments and career development.

Box 3: Abbreviations
DS = Developmental State
FDRE = Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
HR = Human Resource
NGOs = Non-Governmental Organizations
1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a federal state with civil service systems at the central, state, and local government levels. Therefore, the Ethiopian bureaucracy comprises many local governments’ “civil services,” nine regional state civil services, two city administrations, a federal civil service and several federal and state government agencies, parastatals, and corporations. An examination of bureaucracy in this study shall primarily focus on the federal civil service. It is, however, pertinent to point out that the character of bureaucracy at the central level to some extent gives a general picture of the situation in the different states of the federation.

Ethiopia has officially been branding itself as a developmental state since the early 2000s. In the context of the developmental state, the basic framework of the public administration might be expected to incorporate a highly competitive, extensive, relatively efficient, and effective public bureaucracy. In this light, it is pertinent to argue that Ethiopia needs to have a public service that is competent, professional, autonomous, and strong, among other qualities; if it desires to use the state as a crucial vehicle to realize its developmental objectives. However, Ethiopian public service is said, by the government and others, to be weak, and daily government reports (i.e., many parliamentary reports and higher government officials’ press releases) indicate that implementation failure is the major problem of the government. By the same token, studies of the Ethiopian developmental state (Desta Asayehgn, 2012; Fantini, 2013; UNDP, 2012) criticize the current public service as dysfunctional and unable to implement policies and carry out the ideals of the developmental state (DS).

Thus, the creation of a meritocratic bureaucracy and extensive state capacity is imperative.

Meritocratic bureaucracy depends, among other things, on the organization and management of career development. Civil servants should have opportunities to realize their full potential. They should be able to attain higher positions commensurate with their capabilities and demonstrated achievements. In other words, apart from the meritocratic recruitment into the public service, it is essential to consider merit in the promotion of personnel. This is accepted universally as a general principle. By the same token, since civil servants at top management positions have major impact on government policy implementation, they need to be selected and/or promoted carefully.

In order to address these issues the chapter is organized into five sections. The first section is an introduction that gives an overview of the chapter, including the objective, statement of the problem, and the main question.
This study questions whether Ethiopian civil service is meritocratic or not. To this end, meritocracy in the Ethiopian civil service is evaluated in terms of the legal environment, recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal, and transfer. In section 2, the relevant literature (books, journals, and research proceedings) related to the topic under discussion is reviewed. The third section presents the methodology by which the research was guided and data were collected and analyzed. Data presentation and discussions are entertained in the fourth section. Section five presents conclusions and possible recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Meritocracy

Meritocracy, or government by those with talent, seems self-evidently a good idea. The most able people will produce the best possible results and therefore the public welfare of the whole population will be optimized. Meritocracy, therefore, offers a fair system that result in better outcomes for both the individual and society. Meritocracy provides talented and hard-working people from all walks of life with a means of advancement and the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the larger society. It can be a powerful vehicle for social mobility and incentivize people to do their best and reach their fullest potential (UNDP, 2015:4).

Meritocratic recruitment and career progression is one of the key features of Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy. Meritocratic civil service emphasizes talent and education. It is a system of governance based on ability rather than on wealth, race, or other determinants of induction. The literature tells us that bureaucracies in successful developmental states are characterized by meritocratic recruitment, provision of promotion incentives, rationality, and guarantees of high levels of prestige and legitimacy to bureaucratic officials (Johnson, 1982).

An important study by Evans and Rauch (1999) considered whether state bureaucracies characterized by meritocratic recruitment and predictable, rewarding career ladders are associated with higher growth rates (Evans and Rauch, 1999:760).

Furthermore, the highly influential 1997 World Development Report asserted that “making a meritocracy of the civil service helps bring in high-quality staff, confers prestige on civil service positions, and can do a great deal to motivate good performance” (World Bank, 1997: 92). Where instead
promotions are personalized or politicized, civil servants worry more about pleasing their superiors among influential politicians, and efforts to build prestige through tough recruitment standards are undercut (World Bank, 1997:93).

Meritocratic bureaucracies typically attract the best graduates in a country, who upon entering public administration are able to follow long-term career paths and work according to the rules and established norms within the bureaucracy (Dasandi, 2014). The absence of meritocracy in the bureaucracy, on the other hand, is generally seen to produce public administrations that are inflated, inefficient, dishonest, and lacking in autonomy from political leaders (Fritzen and Menocal, 2007).

In the context of the civil service, meritocracy is commonly discussed in connection with recruitment and promotion practices. Evans and Rauch underline that the importance of meritocratic recruitment, which ideally is based on some combination of education and examination, needs to be considered with a second characteristic: a predictable career ladder, which provides long-term tangible and intangible rewards for those recruited into the bureaucracy (Evans and Rauch, 1999:751).

As far as promotion is concerned, two systems are popular in many countries: career-based and position-based. Countries with a career-based system tend to have a relatively high degree of mobility and sophisticated promotion mechanisms. As a result, they also usually have a definition of senior civil servants which includes a large number and goes relatively low in the hierarchy. However, one of the main drawbacks of such systems lies in the difficulty of maintaining a good degree of competition between candidates to senior positions over time, resulting, to various degrees, in weaker performance criteria for promotion (OECD, 2003:15).

Therefore, meritocracy, basically, includes: meritocratic recruitment, an objective performance evaluation system accompanied by incentives and punishments, and merit based promotion.

### 2.2. Bureaucracies in Developmental States

The civil service is the major facilitator for implementing the will of the state as expressed through public policy; and it is a professional body of officials, permanent, paid, and skilled (Finer, cited in Briggs, 2007). It is a system that offers equal opportunities to all citizens to enter the government service, equal pay to all employees doing work requiring the same degree of intelligence and capacity, equal opportunities for advancement, equal favorable conditions, and equal participation in retirement allowances, and
equal demands upon the employees (Willoughby cited in Briggs, 2007). It is indispensable to the functioning of the modern state, which is why the fate of a society is largely determined by the performance of the public service (Basu, cited in Briggs, 2007).

The major requirements of meritocratic civil service are that it should be impartially selected, administratively competent, politically neutral, and imbued with the spirit of service to the community (Gladden, 1948). Hence, human resource management and development processes in effective bureaucracies are required to abide by competence-based recruitment, promotion, appraisal, remuneration, etc. based on merit principles.

The literature tells us that bureaucracies in successful developmental states are characterized by meritocratic recruitment, provision of promotion incentives, rationality, and guarantees of high levels of prestige and legitimacy to bureaucratic officials (Johnson, 1982). This has also been identified as a key factor distinguishing developmental states from the neo-patrimonial: while in the former recruitment and promotions in the bureaucracy are meritocratic, they are more personalized in the latter (Leftwich, 1995). Meritocratic bureaucracies, in successful developmental states, typically attract the best graduates in a country, who upon entering public administration are able to follow long-term career paths and work according to the rules and established norms within the bureaucracy (Dasandi, 2014).

In Korea, for example, a major reform took place within the bureaucracy in the 1960s. The government reintroduced a highly competitive and open exam system for the higher and lower echelons of the civil service, which attracted the best Korean students from the country’s two universities due to the social prestige usually associated with administrative positions. What is more, a strong policy of internal promotion and reducing the share of appointees also contributed to bureaucratic competence in the Korean developmental state (Mah, 2011). Similarly, the public administration in Singapore is probably the most educated professional body among public servants in the world and constitutes a major explanatory factor in the meteoric rise of that country (Adei, 2008). The absence of meritocratic bureaucracy, on the other hand, is generally seen to produce public administrations that are inflated, inefficient, dishonest, and lacking autonomy from political leaders (Smith, 2009).

In the early 2000s, the developmental state rhetoric surfaced in Ethiopian politics. A policy discussion document titled “Democratic Developmental State” was produced in 2003 by the government. A series of seminars and conferences were organized around this issue. Hence, taking the claim made by Ethiopian government to be developmental state into consideration, it is imperative to evaluate the civil service and ask whether it is in alignment
with the requirements of the developmental state, inter alia, with meritocratic bureaucracy.

### 2.3. Historical Overview of Ethiopian Civil Service

#### Early Stage
The Ethiopian civil service is a century old. Yet, the establishment of modern state organizations in Ethiopia took place very late relative to Europe and other parts of the world. The early years of the twentieth century witnessed the beginning of modern public administration and the emergence of civil servants in Ethiopia (Adebabay, 2011). In 1907 nine ministries were established, with the aim of ensuring an orderly and efficient arrangement for the workings of government (MoCSGG, 2012). The ministries were: Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Commerce and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture and Industry, Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of War, Ministry of Pen, and Ministry of Palace (Bahiru, 1991; MoCSGG, 2012; Pankhurst, 1997).

Initially, the ministries were organized in the crude form of the 20th-century European civil service model. As Perham, cited in Paulos (2001:83) states, in 1907-1908 the ministries of justice, war, the interior, commerce and foreign affairs, finance and agriculture, and public works were created and in 1911 a ministry for posts and telegraphs were added while foreign affairs became a separate ministry. The ministries were housed in buildings set up within the palace enclosure (Ibid., 2001:84). The same source states that the ministers were not salaried and appointment was based on loyalty and the number of followers that they could mobilize during wartime. The civil servants were also small in number and were primarily engaged in maintaining law and order.

This formal framework of government under “a Western-inspired” administrative system brought Ethiopia into the twentieth century (Adebabay, 2011:7). Prior to this period, the country was under traditional administration and the different Ethiopian monarchs had failed to build any kind of administrative framework through which they could exercise their absolute power (Paulos, 2001:83).

The attempt to establish modern government organizations was made before the introduction of any formal education, in a sense, putting the horse before the cart. As a result, these ministries were run by feudal lords and priests, with a slight of knowledge reading and writing obtained from church education. Hence, the establishment of the modern administration was not accompanied by the promulgation of personnel rules and regulations. Indeed,
the initial years were characterized by inadequate structures, inefficient services, corruption, and the interference of the nobility in the due process of law in public matters (MoCSGG, 2012). The government officials’ prime objective was to promote the personal interest of the clergy and the nobility. This situation prevailed for about half a century, leading to mass dissatisfaction and frustration (Getachew and Richard, 2006).

**Civil Service during Emperor Hailesellassie I**

Emperor Hailesellassie I had the best claim of instituting modern public administration. It was during his reign that the process of centralizing and modernizing the state reached a relatively advanced stage.

The emperor, during his early days in power, created further ministries for industry, education and fine arts, justice, and public works and Communications (Perham cited in Paulos, 2001:84). From 1930-1935 many important attempts at reform were taken, including: new measures for training the army, the inauguration of a parliament, the development of education, judicial reform, the engagement of foreign advisors, and measures for the abolition of slavery (Ibid).

The implementation of reforms was discontinued as a result of the Italian occupation of 1935-1941. But, after its end and the emperor’s return to power, many reforms were carried out and the whole ministerial system was completely reorganized and greatly extended (Bahru, 1991). Later on in his reign, Emperor Hailesellassie undertook a series of institutionalization and restructuring measures in the hope of bringing about an effective and efficient civil service governed by specified rules and procedures of a uniform nature. These included:

a) **The Administrative Regulation Decree No. 1 of 1942**: Among other things, the decree instituted the appointment by the center of governors-general, directors, governors, principal secretaries, meslanes,¹ and police to each province.

b) **An Order to Define the Powers and Duties of the Ministries, No. 1 of 1943 and An Order to Amend the Ministers (Definition of Powers) Order, 1943, No. 2 of 1943**: Through these two orders, the Council of Ministers was created. Twelve ministers were listed, their powers and relations were defined, and the Office of the Prime Minister was established. The Office of the Prime Minister was made head of all ministries and was responsible for the good administration of all the work in the ministries, harmonizing their duties and transmitting the emperor’s orders (Perham, cited in Paulos, 2001:84). The ministers, among other duties and responsibilities, were charged with the duty of preparing draft
laws – except those reserved for the emperor. They were also empowered to appoint their staff and prepare budget estimates.

c) **The revised constitution of 1955**: This constitution made a clear distinction between posts of confidence and career posts. In Article 66, it states that the emperor has the right to select, appoint, and dismiss the prime minister and all other ministers and vice-ministers. The appointment, promotion, transfer, suspension, retirement, dismissal, and discipline of all other government officials and employees was to be governed by regulations made by the Council of Ministers, to be approved and proclaimed by the emperor.

d) **The establishment of the Imperial Institute of Public Administration in 1952**: this was a significant development for the administration of the country. Its objectives included the training of civil servants, consultation, and research.

The 1960s were a remarkable period in Ethiopian civil service history. During this time modern personnel orders, policies, and directives were introduced. The Central Personnel Agency was established in the same period. The purpose of all these reforms was to establish uniform and rule-driven civil service across Ethiopia. Almost all orders and directives were adopted from the Western personnel management systems, mainly from the United States. The reforms had the following effects: a uniform personnel management system was established throughout the nation; Western-type merit principles were introduced for the first time in the nation’s history; the principle of equal pay for equal value of work was introduced with the position classification job evaluation method; and the Central Personnel Agency was established (Adebabay, 2011:7).

As a result, some very important tasks were attached to the agency. First, it was entrusted with the responsibility of establishing a homogeneous public service governed by uniform rules and principles. Second, it was assigned the responsibility to recruit for both classified and unclassified positions, based on open competitive examination. In other words, merit as a criterion for appointment was introduced, replacing the old method, which was based on favoritism or ascription. Likewise, the agency had the power and responsibility of all appointments except ministerial ranks. The grading and the salary structure were to be based on the position classification system. Finally, a pension scheme for public servants was instituted (Asmelash, cited in Paulos, 2001:86).

However, despite these administrative and institutional arrangements, the high regard given to political loyalty in assigning civil service posts and the level of political interference negatively affected standard operating procedures
(Getachew and Richard, 2006). For example, people were employed through personal acquaintance and relationships with the nobility. Anyone who did not have some kind of relationships, no matter how intelligent, was refused any kind of service or employment. It was, therefore, a widely established culture among the people to pay tribute and bribes to the nobility in order to get any kind of service from the public office. Judges and local officials were under the influence of the nobility (MoCSGG, 2012). As a result, the Ethiopian civil service repeatedly failed to deliver intended services to the public.

Paulos (2001:86) also discussed some other problems of the then civil service as:

... the absence of strict adherence to the civil service rules and regulations, and political interference in administrative affairs were seen as chronic problems of the time. However, generally speaking, during the period, the foundation of the modern bureaucracy was laid down and the importance of an efficient administrative system was recognized. Consequently, the civil service seemed to be accepted as the chief instrument available to governments for promoting economic and social development.

Civil Service during Dergue
The political economy system of this regime favored central economic planning and banned private ownership. As a result, the nationalization measures, along with the proliferation of new government institutions and corporations, led to a tremendous expansion of the public sector (Getachew and Richard, 2006). At the same time, the government converted the civil service into an instrument for promoting its communist ideology and ruling the people.

There were two confusing structures at this time (Paulos, cited in Adebabay, 2011): the political and the functional. All the decisions in the civil service institutions were made through the political structures by political cadres. There was virtually no place for apolitical professionals. In other words, under the military regime, the civil service was highly politicized and most top- and middle-ranking civil servants were members of the military regime's party, known as the Ethiopian Workers Party.

Therefore, as described by Hiwet, (cited in Getachew and Richard, 2006) the regime was a combined “military/bureaucratic dictatorship.” In connection with this, the military administration issued many instructions, rules, and regulations to control the civil service institutions within the boundary of its ideology (Debela, nd).

During this period there were no fundamental reform measures promulgated to alter or modify the functioning and management of the civil
service. Except for the introduction of a few reform measures, the civil service operated under the different orders and decrees issued during the reign of Hailesellassie (Paulos, 2001:86). Of course, some new ministries, commissions, agencies, and authorities were created, while others were merged or dissolved. Many were also renamed. A case in point is the Central Personnel Agency, which was renamed the Public Service Commission. The Dergue also took some reform measures with regard to the salary scale of the civil service. The major ones were: the increase in the starting salary of the civil service from Br. 25 to Br. 50 (in 1975) and a shift in the ceiling from Br. 285 to Br. 636 for eligibility of periodic salary increment (in 1982) (Paulos, 2001:86).

However, despite such attempts of organizational and administrative reforms, the civil service remained problematic. According to Meheret (cited in Getachew and Richard, 2006), the Dergue regime was put in disarray by the fusion of the institutions of party, state, and government. It also encouraged the proliferation of parallel structures by appointing party functionaries to key decision-making civil service positions (Paulos, 2001:87) Hence duplication and fragmentation of public functions and the downplaying of merit and professionalism became the order of the day. The subsequent years were characterized by the centralization of administration in addition to increases in corruption, inefficient service delivery, and the routine neglect of the due process of law in matters of public concern (Getachew and Richard, 2006). As a result, the civil service inherited by the succeeding government was seriously weak in its capacity to implement government policies and to deliver public services.

2.4. The Legal Framework Governing the Ethiopian Civil Service

The currently effective rule under implementation for the Ethiopian civil service is the Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 1064/2017, which was issued to address the problems identified during the implementation of proclamation No. 515/2007. Every aspect of the Ethiopian civil service is supposed to function in accordance with this proclamation and the then-FDRE public service commission follows up if every civil service institution implements the proclamation accordingly.

In the context of Ethiopia, the public service is broadly defined as those employees of the state who are covered by national and civil service laws. Accordingly, civil servants are government employees governed by the Federal Civil Servants’ Proclamation number 1064/2017. According to Proclamation No 1064/2017, article 1: A civil servant means a person employed permanently
by a federal government institution; provided, however, it shall not include the following:

a) Government officials with the rank of state minister, deputy director general, and their equivalent and above;

b) Members of the House of Peoples’ Representatives and the House of Federation;

c) Federal judges and prosecutors;

d) Members of the armed forces and the federal police, including other employees governed by the regulations of the armed forces and the federal police; and

e) Employees who are excluded from the coverage of this proclamation by other appropriate laws.

Thus the proclamation excludes from the civil service elected officials, legislators, the judiciary, the armed forces, and the federal police. The civil service therefore denotes the nonpolitical or permanent executives recruited to serve the government in the implementation of policies through the management and conduct of governmental affairs.

The Ethiopian civil service applies a “career-based system” of employment for civil servants in several sectors, like teachers and health professionals, and a “position-based” system for others. Many of the merit principles in setting up career structures from recruitment to promotion are adapted to the Proclamation. Typically, civil servants are recruited at various services and grades within the public service. Entry grades may be at junior level or at senior level. “A vacant position shall be filled only by a person who meets a qualification required for the position and scores higher than any other candidates” (Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 1064/2017, article 13). This shows that civil service institutions make an effort to match the competencies of new recruits to specific classified positions. Thus, in general, staffs are expected to successfully meet the position requirements and there are no specialist career paths. Basically, therefore, it is more of a position-based civil service system.

The Federal Civil Service Proclamation lays down requirements for entry into the public service. Concerning selection and recruitment of new staff, the human resource planning of each civil service organization is expected to enable a government institution to take measure to meet the objective specified in the strategic plan and to forecast its human resource demand. The Proclamation declares that while filling vacancies in the civil service, there shall be no discrimination among job seekers or civil servants because of their ethnic origin, sex, religion, political outlook, disability, HIV/AIDS status,
or any other ground. Similarly, the HRM reform program has recognized that greater use of open recruitment and improved competitive promotions are fundamental to the development of a “modern” civil service (MoCSGG, 2012). Thus, at least legally public service positions are supposed to be filled on the basis of merit.

As stipulated in the FDRE constitution article 74/2 the prime minister appoints ministers for ministerial posts (FDRE, 1995). Similarly regional governments appoint the heads of various institutions under their jurisdiction. It is, therefore, both at national and regional levels that ministers and bureau heads are expected to lead their respective offices, including HR activities. In many government institutions HR activity is located within a specific HR unit within the ministry or bureau. Responsibility for examining and recommending a candidate for a post lies with the human resource/personnel department of the respective institution. Accordingly, civil service can recruit at the department and service head levels. In the higher service the successful candidate is appointed to office by the concerned minister. The middle and lower staff are appointed to office by the director of the service concerned or the head of the personnel department of the ministry. Hence, despite the fact that the civil service is centrally controlled, staff management in the Ethiopian civil service is still relatively decentralized.

According to the federal civil servants’ Proclamation (No. 1064/2017) promotion shall be given for the purpose of enhancing the performance of government institutions with an intention of motivating the employees. Similarly, transfer in the civil service system, whenever necessary, is based on a transparent procedure. A government institution may transfer a civil servant to another similar position of an equal grade and salary or to another place of work within the government institution. This can happen among other government institutions also, whenever necessary and when the recipient and sender government institutions as well as the civil servant agree. Once the consent of the aforementioned parties is gained, transferring a civil servant to a similar position of equal grade and salary from other government institution can be done by notifying the ministry (ibid). According to this proclamation, the purpose of promotion and transfer is to enable civil servants to discharge their duties effectively in accordance with the expected level, quality standards, time, and expense.

Concerning remunerations, the Ethiopian civil service proclamation states that any newly appointed civil servant shall be paid the base salary as fixed by the civil service salary scale for the position to which he/she is appointed. According to the proclamation, the civil service minister prepares a salary scale to be applicable to the civil service in general, submits the same to
the Council of Ministers, and supervises its proper implementation upon approval. The ministry, also upon permission of the Council of Ministers and based on the specific nature of the government institution concerned, shall study salary scales and submit the same to the council. Upon approval, it supervises their proper implementation and when necessary, shall undertake periodical revisions of salary scales based on economic changes and other relevant conditions and submit these revisions to for approval by the Council of Ministers.

The proclamation also states that all positions of equal value shall have equal base salary and that periodical salary increases to civil servants shall be based on their performance evaluation results. That is, if a civil servant obtains an evaluation result of satisfactory or above satisfactory, he/she shall be entitled to a salary increase to be made every two years (FDRE Proclamation No. 1064/2017).

Generally speaking, the country has good policy frameworks that promote meritocratic recruitment practices. However, empirical evidence in this study reveals that guidelines for recruitment and other human resource functions mostly do not adhere to the legal frameworks. Thus, it can be argued that the problem is not the absence of legislative framework, but rather the implementation of the legislation.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework used to analyze the meritocracy in the Ethiopian civil service is institutional theory. Generally speaking, institutional theory is a theoretical framework for analyzing social phenomena that views the social world as significantly comprised of institutions – enduring rules, practices, and structures that set conditions for action. Institutions are fundamental in explaining the social world because they are built into the social order and direct the flow of social life.

Thus, the main argument of institutional theory is that institutional factors play a major role in defining and underpinning state capacity. The key to state/bureaucratic capacity is, therefore, “finding the right institutional framework” or rules of the game (Andrews, 2013:4). The theory also tries to explain how and why this is so. As a result, institutions become the key explanatory variables for state capacity, including bureaucratic capacity. Hence, institutional theory becomes relevant to the study of public administration and its institutions because government organizations are institutional in many ways.
The research approach is basically a qualitative case study. The actual data collection covered three institutions: The Public Service Commission, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, and Ministry of Trade and Industry, which are purposely, selected for their strong relevance vis-à-vis the issue under study. The instruments used for collecting data wherein-depth interview with key informants; focus group discussions; and document analysis. A total of sixty-three personnel, including all levels of officers, participated in interviews and focus group discussions.

4. Discussions

4.1. Assessment of Recruitment Practices in the Ethiopian Civil Service

Recruitment and selection are important components of the human resource management reform of Ethiopia. It was introduced to bring about a merit-based system in civil service institutions throughout the country. The reform is meant to solve the problems that were identified in the process of recruitment and selection that hindered the achievement of a merit-based system in the civil service. Hence, issues related to recruitment and selection procedures, definition of job requirements, and human resource planning were given due emphasis to properly consider the process of recruitment and selection in a way that supports the achievement of a merit-based system in the civil service.

However, the findings of various studies show that the intended result of such programs has not been achieved. For example, a study by Tesfaye and Atakilt (2012) reveals the human resource capacity gap as a critical challenge adversely affecting organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and good governance in Ethiopian public organizations. Their assertion resonates with frequent reports of federal institutions as well as other concerned government officials. In their consecutive annual implementation reports, almost all the ministries have admitted their inability to attract qualified personnel from the market. The shortage of skilled human resource across the civil service is further aggravated by insufficient recruitment practices. The public sector recruits employees from universities, colleges, technical and vocational schools, as well as from other sectors. In most cases, the usual difficulty is that of attracting adequate numbers of civil servants with sufficient specialized training to enable them to carry out developmental state ideals.

The literature on the East Asian developmental states stipulates that though the bureaucracy in those countries was challenged by geographical
affiliation, school connections, and kinship networks, it usually introduced a meritocracy, united and coherent. For example, in Korea, “the bureaucracy was indeed selected according to a highly competitive entrance examination that has usually attracted the countries’ best students” (ibid: 7). What is more, public servants were recruited through a closed-career merit system. In other words, appointments were made on the basis of university qualifications and a selection examination.

In the case of Ethiopia, article 13, and sub-article 2 of the FDRE Civil Servants Proclamation states that a vacant position shall be filled only by a person who meets the qualification required for the position and who scores higher than other candidates (FDRE, Civil Servants Proclamation, 2007). There is also an implementation manual that indicates the procedure of recruitment and selection to be followed uniformly by all civil service institutions. The manual covers the issues of merit principles, like qualifications, work experience, knowledge, and skills as well as other capabilities and the overall procedure to achieve fair and open competition. Thus, it can be argued that at the policy level, except for being a position-based system, the recruitment procedures and considerations are similar to those of other developmental states. However, in practice various reasons account for the non-meritocratic recruitment into the Ethiopian public services.

The first issue examined by this study was how merit is considered; and whether non-meritocratic parameters influence the recruitment process in selecting candidates at the entry level. The purpose was to know civil servants’ perceptions regarding the criteria for recruitment at the entry level.

Results show that, primarily at the entry level, employees are recruited based on their qualification, experience, and performance. Similarly, the implementation of job specifications seems encouraging, with some limitations. However, job descriptions are not utilized at the expected level to support the implementation of recruitment and selection. It seems also that even entry level recruitment does not exclude the possibility of political affiliation in recruiting and promoting employees in the civil service. In fact managerial positions, especially middle and higher ones, are reported to be exclusively reserved for politically loyal personnel with ethnic background as a supplementary qualification.

Empirical data also disclosed that there are violations of merit principles, exacerbated by poor attention to human resource planning and definitions of job requirements in the recruitment and selection process. The guidelines are violated to the extent that individuals are selected and assigned without competition and on the basis of personal connections and sometimes with political interference. The overall sentiment appears to indicate that the
guidelines are not strictly considered as required in a way that convinces and satisfies most of the civil servants.

The related issue is written examination in the recruitment process. In this regard, the federal civil servants’ recruitment manual states that civil service institutions shall set examinations to screen the most eligible candidates depending on the nature of respective organizations. In practice, however, recruitment under this provision has been negligible. Instead, Ethiopian civil service is characterized by “mixed” recruitment patterns that fall into two categories: those which recruit personnel by competitive written examinations and those which recruit them by comparison of the paper qualifications already possessed by the candidate.

The most common recruitment practice in the institutions under study does not apply formal examinations in screening the most eligible candidates. The most common practice is that of screening candidates based on educational credentials and relevant work experience produced by the candidates. In such institutions, the procedure for entry to the civil service requires the candidate to apply to an individual government institution in writing, stating his/her qualifications. Because the civil service may recruit at department and service head levels most of the time, it is highly prone to nepotism.

Therefore, the abandonment of the guidelines for recruitment into public service inadvertently opens the gate of entry into the service for incompetent persons. As a result of de facto recruitment procedures and conditions, merit is compromised. This, to a large extent, affects the performance of the Ethiopian bureaucracy in the area of policy articulation, implementation, and evaluation. It is worthy of note that the inadequacy of personnel, particularly as it relates to expertise and skilled manpower, results in part from the personnel recruitment practices, which are essentially based on non-meritocratic criteria that contrast with objectively measurable criteria like qualification and professional competence.

In addition to malpractices regarding recruitment, lack of proper and attractive incentives is also mentioned as a factor affecting the competence and effectiveness of the civil service.

4.2. Practice of Promotion in Ethiopian Civil Service

The Ethiopian civil service system, in terms of recruitment and promotion, resembles the position-based system. However, such a system is less favorable to civil services in other developmental states (DS). Civil services in DS require, among other things, that the political and permanent executives in the civil service share common culture and goals. Such a civil service also
needs to be merit-based. Alas, as discussed in the literature review and also in the above section, while a position-based civil service system facilitates high mobility among civil servants, it results in the lack of a common culture among top executives. What is more, such a system tends to undermine merit-based promotion. Because of this, unlike Ethiopia, many developmental states prefer a career-based civil service system to one that is position-based.

Empirical data from the institutes researched for this study show that the promotion of civil servants is determined more by the interests of political officials and personnel officers than by their merit. In an interview with a state minister for the Ministry of Public service and Human Resources, he explained how promotions are made and the role of party affiliation regarding promotion as follows:

De jure, Ethiopian Civil Service is apolitical and professional. However, in practice there may be some deviations from the rule. Civil Service promotes professional achievements and merit as requirements for entry into and promotion within the Service. But political backing may be an important factor for promotion to senior ranks. Of course, senior civil servants (directors) must first meet professional requirements, but support for the government’s ideologies and policies may also be important for an appointment.

As reflected in different documents, procedures for assessing the suitability of candidates for internal promotion vary somewhat across ministries. In recent years, there have been attempts to make the promotion process relatively competitive. In this regard, the tradition of promotion, which used to be based on consistory approach (based only upon seniority and suitability), has been supplemented by competitive processes, though the practice varies among ministries and also among departments within a ministry. In general, a combination of interview performance, manager assessment, and success in meeting the requirements of the candidate’s current job are all taken into consideration to varying degrees.

There is no or little hope for the civil servants to be promoted to the next position. So, they are co-opted to remain hopeless in terms of civil service career progression. As a result, they are obliged to search for other options outside the civil service or join some networks within the service which may help them rise up the ladder.

For those who are outside the given ministry, political party officials have the power to make and unmake higher officials. They may recommend persons for holding higher posts in a given ministry and also can recall personnel
they are not comfortable with. As a result, in these ministries the promotion of civil servants without the necessary political affiliation is slow or absent.

Therefore, in addition to the malpractices and abuses of the existing system, the civil service system which Ethiopian civil service prefers to practice does match the requirements of a developmental state’s bureaucracy. This lack of fit, as discussed here, causes problems in the Ethiopian civil service in relation to promotion. Another area of challenge in the civil service is the transfer and mobility of civil servants within and outside the civil service. Related to this, respondents identified as problematic the subjective transfer and posting of civil servants.

4.3. Transfer and Mobility

A feature of a wide range of developmental contexts concerns the movement of high-level bureaucrats into political office, and vice-versa. This can be seen by the high number of important cabinet ministers who are former senior civil servants in many developmental governments (Leftwich, 1995). In many developmental states, a significant proportion of the country’s high-level politicians are former civil servants. For example, in Botswana, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) actively encourages civil servants identified as being politically smart to enter politics at both the local and national level (Charlton, 1991).

For such movement between civil servants and political executives to be realized, however, there is a need to establish a system of promotion, transfer, and appointment that allows it. The Ethiopian civil service, because its system resembles a position-based system, does potentially allow mobility.

At the very least, a significant majority of civil servants doubt or do not expect that positions are filled by civil servants within their own institution. It seems that transferees are more privileged when it comes to positions at higher levels. This practice obviously demoralizes senior civil servants who have served their respective ministries for long years but are ignored when it comes to assuming higher positions.

Here, it is important to note that transfer is useful if managed properly and used for matching skills with the relevant positions. The Ministry of Public Service and Human Resources has prepared a manual that should, in principle, be abided by all federal civil service organizations in Ethiopia. However, existing malpractices related to transfer combine to undermine the manual. The net result of abusing the transfer scheme is a prevalence of transferees within the civil service whose competence is put in doubt, not to mention its instrumentality for politicians’ will. When the senior management of the civil
service is dominated by transferee politicians instead of by the brightest and the best in its system, ministries and other government institutions cannot function at their best as the capacity of higher civil servants to support them in carrying out their functions is largely impaired.

As a result, the civil service does not give due attention to internal mobility. This, in turn, leads to neglecting the processes of proper staff appraisal, which, of course, should be used properly, as it is a useful tool for proper promotion decisions. Indeed there is a gap in this regard.

Generally speaking, there are two other consequences of the uncertainty that arises from tenure that is not mandated or merit based. The incumbent is not sure of how long he/she will stay on the job, as political winds change. This has an adverse effect on his/her attention to detail, his/her capacity to master the situation, and his/her confidence that his/her judgment will be respected. Unsure or unwilling to make difficult but necessary decisions, he/she opts for the tried and tested, or to second guess the preferences of his/her political masters. He/she may ignore, neglect, or discard worthwhile changes made by his/her predecessor. His/her staff may assume that reforms will not stick and avoid the commitment necessary to effect long term change.

Hence, it is in this context that it is crucial and critical to remove uncertainty and imbue the officers with a certain security of tenure in every post, assuming it is merited by proven competence. Stable tenures will motivate senior officers to provide credible leadership and improve organizational performance. A healthy personnel tenure policy should reduce the overall incidence of transfers, and eliminate the emergence of a “transfer industry” or politicized transfers.

4.4. Performance Appraisal to Promotion

Among other things, meritocratic bureaucracy needs merit-based reward, i.e., rewarding civil servants based on their real performance. Career development based on the principle of rewarding merit constitutes the central element for professionalizing the civil service and motivating its officials. In order to reward merit, it is first necessary to put in place an evaluation system that makes possible decisions related to career development. The evaluation system needs to be based on a fair assessment of qualifications and performance, thereby ensuring the promotion of those officials whose competencies can be objectively recognized.

In this regard, the experience of East Asian developmental states is that bureaucrats were given the assurance that if they achieve the performance goals set at the top, they would be promoted to a more prestigious positions,
“all the way up that of minister” (Mah, 2011:17). Similarly, merit-based appointments and promotion of technocrats and bureaucrats, their training, and the reward system have remained crucial in achieving techno-bureaucratic governance in the developmental state of Botswana (Adamolekun, 1999). The other important point is that in many developmental states, the trend regarding ministerial position has been the selection of domestic-oriented ministers with patronage appointments while guaranteeing the professionalism of the economic ministers, such as for finance, trade, industry, agriculture, etc. (Mah, 2011:17).

In the FDRE civil service, career development is based on two factors taken into account simultaneously: seniority on the one hand and assessment of professional skills on the other. However, while seniority does not pose any question, setting objective criteria for performance appraisals poses problems, despite the provisions in legislative texts, which in some cases lay down precise procedures. In practice, in the Ethiopian civil service, non-parametric standards are dominant in evaluating civil servants and thereby promotion related to performance. Hence, a lack of proper evaluation criteria is one of the challenges of the civil service in practicing performance-based promotion. In order to reward merit, therefore, it is first necessary to put in place an evaluation system that makes it possible for decisions relating to career development to be based on a fair assessment of qualifications and performance.

Cognizant of this, Ethiopia has undertaken a civil service reform program with the objective of implementing “result based performance evaluation” throughout the service. A results-based performance evaluation needs a transparent system, accountable management, and measurable performance standards. The intention was that promotion based on merit would to a large degree increase the level of commitment of the bureaucrats and also ensures that competent people are promoted to relevant positions. Any movements within the career space must be based on merits: that is, a demonstrated contribution to the furthering of the organization’s goals, possession of competencies, or potential for development.

In this regard, the civil servants who participated in the research complained that though promotion in principle is by merit, there is no objective and functioning standard of performance appraisal: “Rules for promotion fail to differentiate between productive and non-productive workers.” This diminishes the value of the evaluation.

Thus, the promotion scheme prevents senior civil service positions from being held by competent career civil servants. In the absence of strict implementation of results-based evaluation systems, rewards have been
seen as being less objective and unable to discriminate hard-working and effective people from those who are. Many respondents complaint of cases where less hard-working and corrupt people are rewarded and promoted based on some other unethical yardsticks, such as loyalty to the supervisor, favoritism, nepotism and so on. This implies that for the vast majority of civil servants there is no hope of promotion to the highest levels, and therefore no motivation to properly execute one’s duty, let alone work overtime. By implication, it seems that in practice, performance appraisal has nothing to do with rewarding civil servants in Ethiopia.

5. Findings and Implications

Given the findings of this study, one of the key challenges in the development of Ethiopian federal civil service capacities is to establish and safeguard the merit principle of recruitment and promotion.

To achieve short- or long-term organizational goals, there is a need for an efficient workforce, which can only be attained by recruiting people with appropriate skills, qualifications, and experiences. Strengthening appointments based on merit requires that the human resources employed by government to execute its policies become efficient and effective. The findings in this research indicate that there indeed exists a system that guides the process of recruitment and selection in Ethiopian civil service institutions, but there is a gap in terms of its proper implementation. In this regard, various reasons account for the non-meritocratic recruitment into the Ethiopian public services.

First, the Ethiopian civil service basically follows a position-based system. In practice, civil servants are recruited at various services and grades within the public service. In general, staffs are expected to successfully meet the position requirements and there are no specialist career paths. In most cases, the usual difficulty is that of attracting adequate numbers of civil servants with sufficient specialized training to enable them to carry out the developmental objectives of the state.

Second, in practice, the Ethiopian civil service is characterized by “mixed” recruitment patterns that fall into two categories: those which recruit personnel by competitive written examinations and those which recruit them by comparison of the paper qualifications already possessed by the candidate. The most common recruitment practice in the institutions under study does not apply formal examinations in screening the most eligible candidates.

Third, the ministries, primarily at the entry level, recruit employees based on their qualification, experience, and performance. Though the role of
political interference, at least at entry level, is insignificant, personal connections and by implication nepotism are prevalent in recruitment processes. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of political affiliation in recruiting and promoting employees in the civil service.

Fourth, practice demonstrates that that basis for recruitment into the Ethiopian public sector has largely shifted from the principles of meritocracy (educational qualification and experience) toward factors such as nepotism, political patronage, (God-fatherism), and ethnicity.

Fifth, the study finds that recruitment and appointment of senior civil servants is loosely regulated. Loose recruitment practices make senior civil service positions a subject of inter-party bargaining. This suggests that there are informal party quotas for distribution of top posts in state administration. In fact, managerial positions, especially middle and higher ones, are found to be exclusively reserved for politically loyal personnel with ethnic background as a supplementary characteristic. Many senior civil servants are at the same time members of the main bodies of the ruling parties, signifying that lines between state and politics are still blurred. Hence, this lack of a system of publicly known and acknowledged political appointment at all levels of the civil service has been undermining the career structure. It prevents senior civil service positions from being held by competent career civil servants. Furthermore, there is no awareness of the need for the appointments of senior civil servants to be merit-driven. This is clearly against the principle of merit-based recruitment in state administration.

Generally, the abandonment of the guidelines for recruitment into public service inadvertently opens the gate for entry into the service for incompetent persons. Therefore, merit is compromised, and as a result, real recruitment procedures and conditions represent major problem in the ministries studied. This, to a large extent, affects the performance of the Ethiopian bureaucracy in the area of policy articulation, implementation, and evaluation. It is worthy of note that the inadequacy of personnel, particularly as it relates to expertise and skilled manpower, results in part from the personnel recruitment practices essentially based on non-meritocratic criteria that stand in contrast to objectively measurable criteria like qualification and professional competence.

A proper and reasonable incentive package is a crucial factor in attracting and retaining competent and effective civil servants. However, in this regard, the studied institutions have been facing critical challenges. In relation to this, the study reveals that:

First, the Ethiopian civil service faces critical shortage of skills resulting from lack of the civil service competitiveness in recruiting and retaining competent employees compared to other sectors like the private sector,
government enterprises, and NGOs. While the challenge to recruit and retain employees with competent skills is apparent, it is a more daunting task to acquire professionals, like IT specialists, research and training staff, and officials in finance.

Second, the lack of a connection between rewards and civil servants’ performance is another challenge. Unlike other developmental states’ civil services, rewards to encourage good performance are not common in the Ethiopian civil service. There is no recognition and punishment attached to discipline and working hard. This means outstanding performance is not recognized and rewarded. Instead, remuneration in the civil service is based on job grade and length of service. This is partly related to an inflexible pay structure, which hinders rewarding performance. Similarly, resolving the critical skills shortage also remains a serious problem in the public sector.

Generally, due to the government’s limited competence to create a decent and attractive work environment, the civil service faces a major challenge in attracting and retaining quality staff. This is attributed mainly to low incentive schemes, with large erosion in real salary income having a crucial bearing on low morale, low levels of productivity, and efficiency.

6. Recommendations

Reduce scope for nepotism: To prevent nepotism, it is necessary to select managers based on merit, using transparent criteria communicated across and even outside the administration. The decision-making must be shared in such a way that the immediate superior should not be the only one to take the final decision on selection. There should either be collective decision-making, e.g., through commissions of some kind, or the “grandfather principle” should be introduced. This principle for balancing powers means that decision on selection or recruitment is formally taken at the level above the immediate superior. Subsequently, the highest civil servants or managers should formally be appointed by a decision of the Council of Ministers or the prime minister.

Establish an assessment centre: In order to improve the recruitment and selection system, establishing an assessment centre is critically important. The centre would enable the combination of more selective methods, which would be very useful. Thus, it would enhance the competitiveness of the public employer and enable it to cope with the critical skills shortage. Such a system has been proven successful in many countries, not only for the selection of personnel to be employed in public administration but also for the career progression of employees who are already part of it.
Improving professional continuity and development within public institutions: Selecting the right staff in the first place is an absolute precondition for subsequent performance. Recruitment situations should also give employers the opportunity to explain career prospects. To make career path opportunities clearer, strategic actions are needed at several stages. In this regard, issues needing to be considered include: how to incorporate career planning in regular performance and career discussions; and how to create pay and other HRM systems that promote both kind of careers: one leading to leadership positions and one leading to expert positions.

Increasing mobility is closely related to this issue. However, since there is no established design regarding mobility, both horizontal and vertical, mobility is a random action. In this sense, the federal civil service faces difficulty in maximally utilizing the mobility of civil servants across departments and in keeping senior civil servants over time. Therefore, in order to make the mobility of civil servants more effective, there is a need to establish central databases of civil servants and potential future senior civil servants with full information on their careers. Of course, the database needs to be public. By doing this, potential appropriate candidates for every position can be easily identified. Such a system would give special attention to civil servants’ career development, while at the same time allowing them to remain in competition with potential future staff coming from outside their group.

Design and establish rational and functional appraisal system: All state administration authorities should consistently implement the performance appraisal of senior managerial staff, as it is already envisaged by the existing appraisal manual.

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Notes

1. Meslâné refers to a sub district governor during the feudal regimes (till the coming to power of the Dergue in 1974).
References


