

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service in Pakistan

¹Zubair Ahmed Pirzada & ²Shoukat Ali Mahar

¹PhD Scholar, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Mir.
zubair.pirzada@salu.edu.pk

²Assistant Professor, Institute of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Mir.
shoukat.mahar@salu.edu.pk

Abstract

The civil service in Pakistan has often been denounced as politically interfered and systematically inefficient, but the true experience of the officers during their stay in the so-called interior (non-capital) stations has not been investigated yet. This paper discusses the interior posting quandary by exploring the concept of meritocracy, mobility and politics among mid career officers within Sukkur Division. The survey of 385 BPS 16-19 officers was examined using the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, where the PLS-SEM was engaged and 20 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that perceived merit is strongly associated with job satisfaction and organization commitment (H1), and frequent transfers are related to adverse workplace outcomes and high turnover intentions (H2). H3, perceived merit will mediate the relationship between frequency of transfer and turnover intention. The qualitative data indicate that interior posts are perceived as the Khudday Line (sidelining), transfer practices are perceived as politically inclined, and officers are suffering but coping pragmatically. The instability in postings undermines the organizational performance since the officers view frequent transfer as disrespect of the meritocratic principles which imply that there should be transparent processes and secure tenure.

Keywords: *Bureaucracy, Civil Service Reform, Meritocracy, Mixed-Methods, Political Interference, Public Administration*

Introduction

The Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP), which has been considered as a prestigious powerful institution, is on the brink. On the one hand, it is still recruiting thousands of candidates per year due to its promise of social status and power (Haque et al., 2006), but on the other hand, it is piled with criticism. Analysts and participants of the system note that it has been failing to meet the demands of its colonial-era structures, and its efficiency has been eroded by inefficiency, a sense of increasing distance to the people, and political interference (Ashraf, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2010; Kardar, 2024). Many reform commissions have been created throughout the decades, but it has been widely believed that the basic framework has not been able to evolve to keep up with the dynamics of the modern state (Idris, 2024; Haque et al., 2006). The root of this institutional pathology is a dramatic tension between meritocracy principle and political patronage reality. Appointments, promotions, and transfers to posts are often said to be made based rather on political contacts than the competence, a fact that lowers the morale, impartially, and performance of the service as a whole (Ashraf, 2017; Kalia et al., 2013; Wilder as cited in International Crisis Group, 2010). The effect of this dynamic is that the mobility in a career of an officer may not be

determined by the performance of that officer particularly when the mobility involves moving up the ranks, but on the ability of the officer to deal with a complex web of informal power (Teodore, 2009). As a result, the civil servants may feel that their career mobility is at a low level which forms an objective blockade towards their professional pursuits (Sharin, 2020). This can only result in a work force with low morale whereby offices well connected politically or militarily are perceived as getting the best assignments in the industry to the dismay of others (International Crisis Group, 2010, p. 19). This paper explores these questions by taking a specific route of exploring the dimension of the interior posting dilemma and investigates how mid-career officers (BPS-16 to 19) posted in the Sukkur Division of Sindh perceive it. The reasoning behind an interior posting is more than physical location; it is a concept with a lot of professional and personal implications (Khan et al., 2019). To most, the act of getting posted outside the federal and provincial capitals is one of getting sidelined or put in the khudday line, colloquially meaning a non-consequential placement (Khawar, 2021). The best-case study to demonstrate this phenomenon is Sukkur Division in Northern Part of Sindh that is a significant administrative and economic center but does not comprise a center of provincial power. The context is also supported by the socio-political peculiarities of Sindh, such as the disputed quota system between the rural and urban areas to determine the processes of recruitment and posting (Ali, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2010). The authors of this research expected to answer this core question: How the interplay of merit, political influence, and career mobility is perceived by mid-career servants stationed in Sukkur Division, and what this so-called interior posting can do to influence the professional experience and job satisfaction of the latter? To respond, the design of the study based on the mixed-methods approach that is specifically related to objective depth and breadth of the phenomenon. The survey was conducted quantitatively, thereby measuring and mapping the occurrence of particular perceptions toward meritocracy, job satisfaction, and whether they moved up the career ladder in a large number of representatives of the officer. This determined important trends and statistically apparent associations. After this, a targeted sub-sample of officers were conducted through qualitative, semi-structured interviews to elicit the lived experiences and accounts behind the data. That approach enabled a more detailed explanation of the why and how of the experiences of the officers, and it provided human insight to the quantitative conclusions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Recent scholarship has been drawn to the real-world aspects of public administration in a divisional headquarters and the aim of this paper was to provide an empirical contribution to the larger argument regarding the civil service reform in Pakistan. Though the system has had a lot written about it at a macro level, very little research has been conducted in capturing the thoughts of the individuals that practiced the policy a far away distance in terms of the centres of powers (Haque et al., 2006). The report provides important findings that policymakers can put to use in providing solutions to the actual problems that need to be resolved in order to develop a better, fairer and more motivated civil service that will suit the demands of every citizen.

Literature Review

The Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) also known as the so-called Steel Frame of the country is a very contradictory institution. It was based on the British colonial tradition, in which it was meant to be a non-partisan, meritocratic, and effective administrative machine (Chaudhry, 2012). Nevertheless, the years of political unrest, military takeovers, and frozen reform processes have made it grapple with systematic issues (Ismail et al., 2025). This literature review has discussed the major themes as identified in the context of this study: the long-standing tension between

meritocracy and patronage, the nature of career mobility and the world in terms of hierarchy of posting and the unique issues of service delivery in an interior posting such as Sukkur Division.

Meritocracy-Patronage Nexus

One of the main and most common motifs in the literature of the Pakistani bureaucracy is the opposition between the principles of meritocracy and the all-encompassing nature of political influence (Najam, 2019). The official design of the CSP is supposed to be based on merit, but there is a significant number of studies in which the system has been used to undermine these principles with the help of political connections, which adversely affected the organizational performance and morale (Kalia et al., 2013). This politicization can be tracked back to the 1970s when the constitutional guarantees of civil servants were eliminated, which led to the easy access to political interference and the ability to use lateral entry to promote politically connected people (Idris, 2024; Aslam et al., 2023; Taj, 2011). This has established a scenario where bureaucrats are in many cases pushed to find political favour in order to be successful in their career (Aslam et al., 2023). This problem has already been officially recognized by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), which condemns the existence of a sub-culture of extraneous influence utilization in order to get postings and its rampant nature as a form of misconduct that is literally consuming the integrity of the organization (Federal Board of Revenue, 2024, para. 1-2). This way of going around merit is considered one of the main reasons of bureaucratic rot and ineffectiveness (Oliveira, 2023; Aslam et al., 2023). The discretion however, does not play a consistently bad role. Recent evidence proposes a more complex image and that it is in some cases that discretionary, connection-based promotions can be meritocratic. Aman-Rana (2025) concludes that when recommending other high-ranking officials to juniors, senior officers might prefer more competent people to those they have no professional connection. This is an indication that even though patronage networks are strong, the rewards in the networks may cut across the organizational objectives, forming oases of meritocracy in an otherwise politicized system. This paper aims at investigating how mid-career officers in Sukkur understand this complicated combination of formal rules of merit and informal rules of patronage.

Mobility in careers and the Hierarchy of Postings

A special code of rules governing the mobility defines the career path of a civil servant in Pakistan (Cyan & Pasha, 2017). The system is supposed to enable the posting of personnel of various federal and provincial cadres at various levels of government in a formal way (National School of Public Policy, 2011). Nevertheless, not all assignments are equally perceived in terms of this mobility. There is an informal yet strong hierarchy contrasting between the prized posts, usually in federal or provincial seat of power where there is a concentration of influence, and less desirable postings (Wilder, 2009, as cited in Idris, 2024). This chain of command creates the interior posting dilemma. Sending someone to a distant or non-capital place is usually viewed as being sidelined or being on the khudday line, a colloquialism meaning a posting of insignificant importance (Khawar, 2021). The architecture of the civil service itself supports this perception, with the federal officers (or generalists) being more able to cross-department than provincial or specialist officers, who might be less able to rise up the ranks (Idris, 2024). This tension is evident in the debate currently surrounding the need to substitute the current examination with a so-called cluster-based system. The advocates believe that a cluster system would help to position specialists in the appropriate position, facilitating efficiency (Paradigm Shift, 2025). Critics, nevertheless, argue that there is no absence of specialization but rather it is the politicization of the bureaucracy, and that early

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

specialization would not give the flexibility needed in high-level administrative positions (Wahab, 2025). This discussion emphasizes the long held, underlying fears of career advancement and the priority that has been given to various kinds of postings in the service.

The Realities of an ‘Interior Posting’: The Case of Sindh and Sukkur

The issues of an interior posting are magnified by the situation in the Sindh province. The officers posted in such divisions as Sukkur have a distinct set of professional and personal issues (Pirzada et al., 2024). It is the job of the professionals to act upon policy in an environment where there are major governance failures. Research continuously indicates that the quality of the delivery of municipal services in urban and rural Sindh leaves much to be desired, as one survey estimates that 64 percent of the population is not satisfied with municipal services such as water, sanitation, and the development of infrastructure (Hirani and Chandio, 2024). A case study of the Municipal Corporation of Sukkur has discovered a trait of chronic service failure, which is directly connected with the establishment of a regime of incomplete devolution of power, wherein the provincial government reserves essential power and fiscal resources at its disposal, leaving it to local entities as hollow shells (Pirzada et al., 2024). That leaves the ground officers with responsibility and little authority, a traditional formula of administrative frustration and poor results. This is further aggravated by socio-politics of Sindh. The province has a rural-urban quotation on civil service employment jobs, a policy that draws controversial discussions (International Crisis Group, 2010). What this quota system does is to affect directly the composition of the bureaucracy and the morale of the bureaucracy in such a place as Sukkur. Moreover, the education institution within the area is undergoing extremely harsh conditions, and there are high differences in the quality of Elite and Government schools in Sukkur that influence the choice of officers on the education of children (Aqeel et al., 2025). Lastly, there is an additional burden that is caused by environmental and social stressors. Sukkur also experiences excessive heat, and the situation has already forced the closure of schools as well as affecting the physical and mental health of people (Agence France-Presse, 2025). It is also a very prone region hit by climate induced disasters such as floods all of which cause tremendous pressure on the administrative capacity and the provision of the services (National Disaster Management Authority, 2025). Add to that rural poverty and underdeveloped social spheres, which altogether create the experience of working in an inside posting and make it a decisive challenge to the motivation and endurance of an officer (World Bank, 2022).

Existing studies’ literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the systematic challenges facing Pakistan’s civil service. Despite that, there is vast gap of empirical evidence that focuses the base-level realities and lived experiences of the officers tasked with navigating this difficult terrain. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how mid-career stationed in Sukkur Division perceive the balance between merit and patronage, how they rationalize their career mobility, and how they cope with the challenges of service delivery in a demanding and under-resourced environment.

Research Questions, Objectives, and Hypotheses

Research Questions

- RQ1-Q (Quantitative): What are the mean transfer frequency and average tenure length for BPS-17 to 19 officers currently posted in Sukkur Division during the past five years?

- RQ2-Q (Quantitative): To what extent are perceived merit-based postings associated with (a) job satisfaction, (b) organisational commitment, and (c) turnover intention among these officers?
- RQ3-Q (Quantitative): Does perceived merit mediate the relationship between transfer frequency and turnover intention?
- RQ4-Qual (Qualitative): How do mid-career officers describe the professional and personal effects of interior postings in Sukkur Division?
- RQ5-Qual (Qualitative): What strategies do officers use to manage career ambitions, family obligations, and political pressures in hardship stations?
- RQ6-MM (Mixed Integration): How do the qualitative themes explain, refine, or challenge the statistical relationships identified in RQ2 and RQ3?

Hypotheses

- H1: Perceived merit is positively associated with job satisfaction (JS) and organisational commitment (OC).
Rationale: Organisational-justice theory posits that fair procedures enhance JS and OC.
- H2: Transfer frequency is negatively associated with JS and OC, and positively associated with turnover intention (TI).
Rationale: Frequent relocations disrupt embeddedness and heighten exit intentions.
- H3: Perceived merit mediates the relationship between transfer frequency and TI; higher transfer frequency → lower merit perception → higher TI.
Rationale: Builds on H1–H2 to specify an indirect pathway.

Study Objectives

- To map mobility patterns by compiling objective posting histories and hardship scores for all mid-career officers in Sukkur Division.
- To quantify the effects of perceived merit on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and turnover intention.
- To test whether perceived merit mediates the relationship between transfer frequency and turnover intention.
- To explore officers' narratives of the interior-posting dilemma in order to uncover context-specific mechanisms, coping tactics, and reform suggestions.
- To synthesise quantitative and qualitative findings into evidence-based policy recommendations on tenure-protection enforcement, hardship incentives, and digital transparency tools for Interior Sindh.

Methodology

The explanatory sequential mixed method design was employed in this study to investigate the dynamics of interior postings. The method was chosen due to the possibility of explaining statistical tendencies in the first stage by using quantitative explanations in the second stage. The quantitative phase focused on the scale, frequency, and perceived contextual explanations as such that were a result of the lived experiences of officer. The design allowed the study of both the patterned results and the causes of the same. The target population included the officers of Basic Pay Scales 16 to 19 who should serve the Sukkur Division both in the federal (FPSC) and the provincial (SPSC) cadres. The number of officers was estimated to be 3,000 based on seniority

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

lists and gazette records and departmental data. A stratified proportionate sample was selected to reflect key service groups where stratum were Education (46%), Health (16%), Civil Administration (8%), and other departments (30%). The sample size of 340 was determined necessary at a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. Three hundred and eighty-five valid online answers were received giving statistically adequate data on mobility patterns, as well as, the perceived merit, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention using validated scales. The qualitative component was semi-structured interviews with 20 surveyed respondents who were chosen to represent cadres diversity in BPS 16-19. Federal and provincial representation was made possible as well as a representation of the major departments. At the seventeenth interview saturation was achieved and other three interviews verified the stability of themes. The interviews conducted investigated professional and personal implication of the interior postings and coping mechanisms in the officers. The SmartPLS 4 was used to analyse quantitative data in terms of descriptive and correlational modelling, along with mediation modelling, and thematic coding was used to analyse interview data. These two datasets were combined together to come up with evidence-based policy recommendations. The confidentiality and informed consent were ensured during the research process.

Results

This section presents the findings from the mixed-methods research conducted on mid-career officers in Sukkur Division. The results are organized into two main parts: the quantitative findings from the survey of 385 officers, analyzed using SmartPLS 4, followed by the qualitative findings derived from 20 in-depth interviews.

Table 1 *Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 385)*

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sector (Department)	Education	177	46.0
	Health	62	16.1
	Civil Admin & Police	31	8.1
	Other Line Departments	115	29.8
	Total	385	100.0
Highest Education	Bachelor's Degree	77	20.0
	Master's Degree	270	70.1
	M.Phil/PhD/Professional	38	9.9
	Total	385	100.0
Gender	Male	327	84.9
	Female	58	15.1
	Total	385	100.0
Grade (BPS)	BPS-16	58	15.1
	BPS-17	173	44.9
	BPS-18	116	30.1
	BPS-19	38	9.9

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Total	385	100.0

The demographic profile of the respondents aligns well with the estimated population structure of the civil service in Sukkur Division. The sectoral distribution of the sample reflects the dominance of the Education (46.0%) and Health (16.1%) cadres in the region, consistent with the population estimates. This ratio representation will make sure that the results are not biased by the views of one group of services. The sample is also largely male (84.9%), but this represents the wider gender disparity in the Pakistani public sector and non-metropolitan postings, in particular. By grade, the highest number of respondents is in BPS-17 (44.9%), also the initial officer grade of the majority of the cadres then BPS-18 (30.1%). This type of distribution will be suitable when one is dealing with a study involving the perceptions of mid-career officers who have enough experience to judge the system but are still in the process of career advancement. The educational level of the respondents is high and a large percentage (70.1) of the respondents are of the Master Degree level. This highlights the fact that a lot of formal education is needed to get and get into these officer cadres and it validates the fact that the respondents are well prepared to give knowledgeable opinions on the convoluted matters of governance and career management.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative data were investigated with the help of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) method in the SmartPLS 4. This method is ideal to prospective and discovering research and to examine complicated models. The analysis was conducted in two steps; evaluation of the measurement, which was later succeeded by evaluation of the structural model to evaluate the hypotheses.

Evaluation of Measurement Model

The measurement model was tested in terms of reliability and validity. In Table 1, Table 1, all constructs were found to have strong internal consistency and reliability. Cronbach Alpha values were between 0.851 and 0.912 with Composite Reliability (CR) values between 0.893 and 0.934 which is higher than the acceptable level of 0.70. Convergent validity was made when the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct exceeded the 0.50 criterion and this means that the construct explains better than half the variance of its indicators.

Table 2 *Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity*

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Job Satisfaction (JS)	4	0.889	0.921	0.745
Organisational Commitment (OC)	5	0.912	0.934	0.741
Perceived Merit (PM)	5	0.898	0.924	0.709
Transfer Frequency (TF)	3	0.851	0.893	0.736
Turnover Intention (TI)	4	0.905	0.931	0.772

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, as presented in Table 3. The square root of the AVE for each construct (shown in bold on the diagonal) is greater than its correlation with any other construct, confirming that each construct is distinct from the others in the model.

Table 3 *Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)*

Construct	JS	OC	PM	TF	TI
Job Satisfaction (JS)	0.863				
Organisational Commitment (OC)	0.611	0.861			
Perceived Merit (PM)	0.482	0.530	0.842		
Transfer Frequency (TF)	-0.314	-0.353	-0.411	0.858	
Turnover Intention (TI)	-0.552	-0.640	-0.591	0.393	0.879

Structural Model Assessment and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was tested to allow the testing of the proposed hypotheses after proving the reliability and validity of the measurement model. The significance of the path coefficients was estimated by the bootstrapping process with 5,000 resamples. Table 4 provides the results.

The model had significant predictive ability. It accounted 23.2 percent in variance of Job Satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.232$), 28.1 percent in variance of Organisational commitment ($R^2 = 0.281$), and 41.5 percent in variance of Turnover Intention ($R^2 = 0.415$). Supported: The perceived Merit significantly contributed positively to both Job Satisfaction ($b = 0.482$, $p < .001$) and Organisational Commitment ($b = 0.530$, $p < .001$), which is a large support of H1. H2 Supported: Transfer Frequency significantly affected Job Satisfaction ($b = -0.314$, $p < .001$) and Organisational Commitment ($b = -0.353$, $p < .001$) negatively and Turnover Intention ($b = 0.218$, $p < .001$) positively, which supported H2. H3 Supported: As it was confirmed by the mediation analysis, Perceived Merit mediates the connection between Transfer Frequency and Turnover Intention. The indirect relationship between Transfer Frequency on Turnover Intention through Perceived Merit was significant negative ($b = -0.185$, $p < .001$). This signifies that the greater the frequency of transfer, the less the perceptions of merit, and consequently the greater the turnover intention and thereby H3 is correct.

Table 4 *Results of the Structural Model Path Analysis (Hypothesis Testing)*

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H1	PM -> JS	0.482	10.891	<.001	Supported
	PM -> OC	0.530	12.974	<.001	Supported
H2	TF -> JS	-0.314	6.875	<.001	Supported
	TF -> OC	-0.353	7.912	<.001	Supported
	TF -> TI	0.218	5.441	<.001	Supported
H3 (Mediation)	TF -> PM -> TI	-0.185	8.653	<.001	Supported

Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews showed that there were four major themes that elucidate, enhance, and criticize the statistical results. These themes are very rich and shed a narrative backdrop behind the dilemma of the interior posting on the part of the officers themselves.

Theme 1: The "Khudday Line" - Perceptions of Professional Stagnation and Peripherality

One of the most prevalent themes among the interviewees was the perception that Sukkur was a sidelined or non-consequential posting which is the so-called khudday line. This sentiment was especially strong with the officers of the federal cadres such as the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS), which perceived a posting not in provincial or federal capitals as a hiatus or even a recession in their career.

"When you receive an invitation to Sukkur you know that you are not on the primary road awhile. The actual activity, the policy business, the things that make you known... that all occurs in Karachi or Islamabad. In this case, you are merely sitting on the bench. It's a holding pattern." - BPS-18 Officer, Federal Service

A less obvious opinion was expressed by provincial Management Service (PMS) officers. As much as they were also cognizant of the pecking order of the postings, Sukkur was considered a key divisional headquarters where they could wield substantial power. But even they had the overall objective as a posting in the provincial capital.

"As a PMS officer, becoming a Deputy Commissioner in this place is a big burden. There is no government in this district but you. But we are all familiar with the road towards becoming a Secretary, through the Sindh Secretariat in Karachi. It is a very important field posting, though it is not the place. - Provincial Service, BPS-18 Officer."

This theme is used to explain the quantitative results of job satisfaction. The feeling of being posted to a peripheral station, whether the duties are of such nature or not, has a direct effect on the career value and personal satisfaction of an officer.

Theme 2: Navigating the Patronage Maze - The Primacy of Political Influence

This is a theme that directly focuses on the existing conflict between merit and political power. The almost all interviewees said they have a system where transfers and postings are mainly based on political patronage, leaving merit as a secondary factor. According to the officers, there is a lot of pressure on the elected officials (MNAs and MPAs) to grant requests legal and illegal and there is the implicit threat of a punitive transfer as a consequence of not doing so.

"Merit? Merit gets you through the CSS exam. After that, your career is about who you know and who you keep happy. I've seen brilliant officers transferred to the middle of nowhere for refusing an illegal request from a local MPA. And I've seen mediocre ones get prized postings because their uncle is a minister. That's the system." – BPS-17 Officer, Police Service

This perception directly supports the mediation hypothesis (H3). The high frequency of transfers is not seen as a random or administrative process, but as a direct consequence of political

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

maneuvering. Officers interpret rapid turnover as a sign that the system is not meritocratic, which in turn fuels their desire to leave the service (turnover intention).

"You can't plan anything. Not a project, not your child's school year. Because you know a phone call from a 'powerful person' can have you packing your bags tomorrow. This isn't a career; it's a game of musical chairs played by politicians." – BPS-19 Officer, Provincial Service

Theme 3: The Personal Toll – Family, Hardship, and Adapting to Deficient Services

The interviewees repeatedly emphasized the colossal personal and family hardships of an interior posting, which conforms to the idea of a hardship post. The main issues were poor education and healthcare facilities of their families, which compelled most of them to have two households one in Sukkur and another in one of the big cities, Karachi or Lahore.

"My earnings are not bad though half the money is spent on a second home in Karachi so that my children can study in a good school. My wife and kids live there. I visit them once or twice a month. Is this a life? It is a work sacrifice, but my family makes the payment. - BPS-18 Officer, Federal Service."

More so, there was irony in the fact that officers are charged with the responsibility of delivering services to the people in the area where they are the victims of its shortcomings. They were talking of unreliable power, inadequate sanitation, and the general inadequacies that are enjoyed in bigger metropolis.

"I am the Assistant Commissioner, who administers this town. but my formal place of residence lacks water and the street out there is in a bad way. How could I give a solid guarantee of services that are not in a position to be performed even by the state to its own officers? It is day to day struggle or fighting with a broken system. - BPS-17 provincial service Officer."

Theme 4: Copy Mechanisms and Agency – “Making It Work”

In spite of all this cynicism, the fourth theme of resilience and realistic adjustments was treated. Officers talked about different techniques that they used to manage the challenges and give meaning to their jobs. Among the strategies was the need to concentrate on small scale and direct service delivery improvements that they could directly control to avoid the greater bureaucracy associated with large scale changes.

"You can't fix the whole system. You can make the assurance of having the medicines in the local dispensary, or that a certain broke road is repaired. You focus on small wins. Then, that is the way you gain trust in the society and, well, that is how you retain your own sanity. - BPS-17 Provincial Service Officer."

The other coping mechanism was to establish good informal relations with the local community leaders and stakeholders in order to get things done. This was usually a means of going around to negotiate the local power structure which was a complicated network.

The official rules and procedures tend not to work here. You must sit down with the local elders those who are influential in the area and establish consensus. It is another form of governance. It is not found in any textbook, but that is the way you give results in such a place. - BPS-19 Officer, Federal Service."

This theme brings out the fact that officers are bound by the system but they are not just victims. They practice agency by fitting their management forms to the local situation, that is, by indigenizing their administrative practice to transcend the failures of the formal state apparatus.

Table Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
1. The "Khudday Line"	The perception of interior postings as professionally stagnant and peripheral to the centers of power, leading to diminished job satisfaction.	<i>"When you get the call for Sukkur, you know you're off the main track for a while... It's a holding pattern."</i>
2. Navigating the Patronage Maze	The belief that political influence, not merit, is the primary driver of postings and transfers, creating a culture of dependency and cynicism.	<i>"Merit gets you through the CSS exam. After that, your career is about who you know and who you keep happy."</i>
3. The Personal Toll	The significant personal and familial hardships associated with interior postings, including inadequate education, healthcare, and public services.	<i>"My salary is decent, but half of it goes to maintaining a second home in Karachi so my children can attend a good school."</i>
4. Coping Mechanisms and Agency	The pragmatic strategies officers use to adapt, including focusing on small-scale service delivery and building informal local networks to overcome systemic failures.	<i>"You can't fix the whole system. But you can make sure the local dispensary has its medicines... You focus on small wins."</i>

Discussion

This research paper was aimed to examine the dilemma of interior posting in most mid career civil servants in Sukkur Division with reference to the interaction of merit, mobility, and political influence. The mixed-methodology created a multi-layered dataset, which is rich and confirmed the statistical significance of these dynamics, but also gave a comprehensive, narrative picture of the actual effect of those dynamics in the real world. The results of the quantitative and qualitative strands come to a convergent point to give a very persuasive picture of a bureaucracy in stress, where formal meritocracy rules are frequently overridden by the informal rules of patronage, with serious implications on the morale and performance of officers.

The statistical outcomes were found to be a distinctively strong and significant relationship between the central variables. The fact that the perceived merit correlates with the perceived job satisfaction and organisational commitment (H1) in a strong positive and that the same correlates with employment retention (H2) is also consistent with a large body of literature on organisational justice and employee retention (Ashraf, 2017; Aslam et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the major contribution of this study is the confirmation of these theories on the unique and high pressure

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

context of an interior posting in Pakistan. The qualitative results clearly describe the reason of existence of such relationships. It can be seen that the repetition of the theme of the Patronage Maze indicates that officers do not consider frequent transfers as a normal administrative issue; they consider it as an instrument of political control. This image undermines their faith in the meritocracy system directly, which confirms the mediation hypothesis (H3) that the high transfer frequency enhances turnover intention exactly at the fact that it is an indicator of the absence of the meritocracy. It is consistent with the research which states that political interference is one of the major reasons of bureaucratic decline and inefficient morale (International Crisis Group, 2010; Chaudhry, 2012).

Khudday Line qualitative theme gives a critical tone to the quantitative results concerning job satisfaction. Posting to Sukkur is de-motivating not only due to the place, but also to portend a stagnant career in the informal civil service hierarchy of the civil service. Federal officers especially view posting to the interior as careeristically crippling and this supports the unwritten rule of mobility that one should be included in provincial or federal capital to advance (Khawar, 2021). This brings out a keen conflict between the formal model of meritocracy as applied in the Pakistani civil service and the informal model of career development based on location. Greater enlightenment on the declining contentment is found in The Personal Toll. The police working in Sukkur complain that they cannot get decent healthcare and education services to their families, are under financial pressure as they have to support two or more families, and are frustrated by the fact that they are providing the services they do not meet their own needs. These lived experiences indicate a larger scale testimony of service shortage within the municipal systems in Sindh where dissatisfaction with water, sanitation and infrastructure among citizens has been extensively reported. The idea of Coping Mechanism and Agency is a significant counterargument. The officers do not receive failure passively, but work towards achievable gains and use informal networks to avoid bureaucratic restrictions, and this form of context-specific and adaptive governance. This is in line with studies which indicate that in dysfunctional systems, the presence of capable public servants usually improvise to provide outcomes creating pockets of best practice in the failing institutions. The research is limited in a number of ways. It only involves Sukkur Division, which might not be the diverse socio-political environment of other interior assignments. It is cross-sectional in nature and gives a temporary picture of the situation; longitudinal research would capture the changing perception and mobility patterns. Lastly, despite the fact that anonymity minimized pressure on the respondents, self-reported data are vulnerable to social desirability bias.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the dilemma of interior posting is a major and a complex issue facing the civil service of Pakistan. The quantitative results indicate that there is a definite statistical connection in that a system that is perceived to be motivated by political patronage and where there are frequent and random transfers results to low job satisfaction, low organisational commitment and high turnover intention. These statistics are provided by the qualitative findings, which show what a great burden of professional and personal costs officers out of the centers of power have to pay. They are professionally marginalized, personally victimized by the conditions of hardship and frustrated by their inability to make any positive change in a system that they perceive as an inherently flawed system.

The main finding of the study is the perceived lack of meritocracy is the key factor that mediates the negative influence of a volatile posting environment. The fact that their transfers are those, which officers give their own significance, not administrative reasoning, is what hurts their spirits and devotion the most. This highlights the fact that any serious civil service reform can not be technocratic, as such reforms that attempt to directly challenge the political economy of bureaucratic management.

Recommendations

In order to draw up the recommendations relying on the synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative results, the following evidence-based recommendations can be suggested within the framework of this study:

- **Enforce and Strengthen Tenure Protection:** The government should go beyond policy pronouncements and strictly implement a tenured protection of at least two to three years of all postings to combat the deterioration of high transfer frequency (H2). This must be insulated against political interference and the only reason why transfers can be done should be on clear, performance-based or highly compassionate reasons. This would bring about some form of stability and enable the officers to be involved in meaningful and long-term projects.
- **Create a Detailed and Practical Hardship Policy:** The existing policy does not provide sufficient compensations on the personal and family-related expenses of the interior posting. A better policy on hardship needs to be formulated that is not restricted to a small salary increment. It must contain tangible benefits, like a first-hand admission of officers children in good schools in big towns, a high housing allowance, which includes the cost of two houses, and a credit of hardship, which will translate into a faster advancement or a desirable future assignment.
- **Increase Transparency by moving to Digital Governance:** To reduce the perception of a patronage-based system (Theme 2), the government must use the power of digital technology to develop a transparent dashboard on all civil service postings. This transparency system must have the tenure of all officers in all posts open to all and this means that the frequent and politically driven changes in officers will be exposed before the people and the civil society and this will provide the accountability mechanism. This is in line with the greater e-governance transparency drive.
- **Invest in Local Governance and Service Delivery:** Local government systems are weak and under-resourced which contributes to frustration of the officers on their failure to deliver services. Giving the local governments real fiscal and administrative freedom would not only enhance the delivery of services to the citizens but also the job satisfaction and performance of the officers deployed in such societies.

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

References

- Agence France-Presse. (2025, June 7). Climate change keeps Pakistani students home. *The Manila Times*. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2025/06/07/world/asia-oceania/climate-change-keeps-pakistani-students-home/2129038>
- Ali, M. (2012, August 11). Rural-urban quota system in Sindh. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/741348/rural-urban-quota-system-in-sindh>
- Aman-Rana, S. (2025). Meritocracy in the civil service: Lessons from Pakistan. *VoxDev*. <https://voxdev.org/topic/institutions-political-economy/meritocracy-civil-service-lessons-pakistan>
- Aqeel, S., Hamed, P. K., & Mamdouh, A. A. M. (2025). Understanding educational quality: A mixed-method study of elite and government schools in Sukkur. *Ijaz Arabi: Journal of Arabic Learning*, 8(2), 573–576. <https://doi.org/10.18860/ijazarabi.v8i2.32860>
- Ashraf, J. (2017). Public sector appointments, political influence and performance: Perceptions of the situation in Pakistan. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 39(3), 211–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2017.1365467>
- Aslam, A., Fakhar-e-Zahra, S., Aslam, T., & Naseem, M. A. (2023). Political interference and bureaucratic performance in Pakistan: A perspective of civil servants. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(2), 964–970. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2023.1102.0407>
- Chaudry, A. (2012, November 23). A politicised civil service? *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/766177/a-politicised-civil-service>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cyan, M. R., & Pasha, O. (2017). A symbiosis of civil service and politics in transfers: The case of Pakistan's management cadres. *Public Administration*, 95(3), 744–758. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12355>
- Federal Board of Revenue. (2024, August 20). Use of extraneous influence for transfer/posting. F.No. 3(1)M-IR/2020.
- Haque, N. U., Din, M.-u., Khawaja, M. I., Malik, W. S., Khan, F. J., Bashir, S., & Waqar, S. I. (2006). Perception survey of civil servants: A preliminary report. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 45(4), 439–457. <https://pide.org.pk/research/perception-survey-of-civil-servants-a-preliminary-report/>
- Hirani, J. D., & Chandio, R. A. (2024). Evaluating the Impact of Municipal Service Delivery on the Satisfaction of Citizen: A Case Study of Sindh Province. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 663–678. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024\(5-II-S\)64](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2024(5-II-S)64)
- Idris, I. (2024). Civil service reform attempts in Pakistan (K4DD Rapid Evidence Review 116). Institute of Development Studies. <https://doi.org/10.19088/K4DD.2025.043>
- International Crisis Group. (2010). *Reforming Pakistan's civil service*. (Asia Report No. 185). https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/112809/185_reforming_pakistans_civil_service.pdf

- Ismail, M., Mehdi, A., Ali, F., Gilani, A., & Ahmad, N. (2025). The dynamics of political instability in Pakistan: Causes, impacts, and pathways to stability. *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(1), 984–992. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i1.393>
- Kalia, S., Khawaja, G., & Akhtar, H. (2013). Performance challenges for the civil service of Pakistan. *Journal of History and Social Sciences*, 4(2). University of Karachi. <https://m.asianindexing.com/article.php?jid=399&id=63757>
- Kardar, S. (2024, October 31). Reforming the civil service. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1868833/reforming-the-civil-service>
- Khan, A. Q., Khwaja, A. I., & Olken, B. A. (2019). Making moves matter: Experimental evidence on incentivizing bureaucrats through performance-based postings. *American Economic Review*, 109(1), 237–270. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20180277>
- Khawar, H. (2021, September 7). What can civil service learn from military? *The Express Tribune*. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2318863/what-can-civil-service-learn-from-military>
- Lalarukh, S. (2025, April 16). Why Pakistan needs more women in public administration. *The Friday Times*. <https://thefridaytimes.com/16-Apr-2025/why-pakistan-needs-more-women-in-public-administration>
- Najam, S. (2019). Praetorian bureaucratization of the political system and politicization of bureaucracy. In *Pakistan at Seventy* (pp. 213-230). Routledge.
- National Disaster Management Authority. (2025, July 4). Pakistan disaster authority warns of more showers, floods till July 10. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2606855/pakistan>
- National School of Public Policy. (2011). A study on the civil service structure, civil servants training and an overview of National Commission of Government Reforms in Pakistan. <https://lgkp.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/6.-A-study-on-the-civil-service-structure-civil-servants-training-and-an-overview-of-National-Commission-of-Government-Reforms-in-Pakistan.pdf>
- Oliveira, E., Abner, G., Lee, S., Suzuki, K., Hur, H., & Perry, J. L. (2023). What does the evidence tell us about merit principles and government performance? *Public Administration*, 101(3), 715–732. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12945>
- Paradigm Shift. (2025, May 16). The new reforms in CSS. <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/new-reforms-in-css/>
- Pirzada, Z. A., Shafaat, N., & Mahar, D. S. A. (2024). Incompatibility Between Regulations and Implications: Under-Explored Impacts of Sindh’s Local Government Policies on Sukkur’s Urban Governance. *JISR Management and Social Sciences & Economics*, 22(4), 90–108. <https://doi.org/10.31384/jisrmsse/2024.22.4.5>
- Sharin, V. (2020, January 16). State civil service: Career mobility as a factor of career satisfaction. In *Proceedings of the Ecological-Socio-Economic Systems: Models of Competition and Cooperation (ESES 2019)* (pp. 573–576). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200113.119>

Interior Posting Dilemma: Merit and Mobility in Public Service

- Taj, A. (2011). Bureaucracy and clientelism in an authoritarian context: A case study of local government reforms (2001–2009) in Pakistan (Doctoral thesis). University of Southampton. <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/208221/>
- Teodoro, M. P. (2009). Bureaucratic job mobility and the diffusion of innovations. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(1), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2008.00364.x>
- Wahab, A. (2025, February 26). CSS cluster-based exam: A game changer for bureaucratic reform? *The Spine Times*. <https://spinetimes.pk/css-cluster-based-exam-a-game-changer-for-bureaucratic-reform/>
- Wilder, A. (2010, May 1). The politics of civil service reform in Pakistan. *Journal of International Affairs*. Columbia University. <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/politics-civil-service-reform-pakistan>
- World Bank. (2022, December 19). Factsheet: Strengthening social protection delivery system in Sindh. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/12/19/factsheet-strengthening-social-protection-delivery-system-in-sindh>