Evaluation of the implementation of merit criteria in the selection of senior bureaucratic officials in Egypt

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aimed to identify the extent of the implementation of merit criteria in the selection of senior bureaucratic officials in Egypt.

Design/methodology/approach – The design of the study is both descriptive in the theoretical part and quantitative in the applied one. The study is based on a literature review and adopts an analytical approach to clarify the related concepts. Besides, an empirical study to investigate the correlations in practice, based on a sample of 380 senior officials to obtain the primary data.

Findings – The results of the study reveal that there are no statistically significant differences between the respondents’ perspectives towards the implementation of merit criteria in selecting senior officials. This means that merit criteria are not always applied, but sometimes. Moreover, the results showed no statistically significant differences between the respondents’ perspectives towards the implementation of merit criteria attributed to gender and age, while there were differences attributed to educational qualification and experience. The study recommended the necessity of adhering to the provisions of the civil service system and reconsidering the procedures of competitive examinations and interviews.

Originality/value – With respect to the Middle East, very limited studies have focused on the implementation of the merit system in recruitment. There is a lack of research and academic articles on this topic (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2016; Afiouni et al., 2014). The study addresses this gap in research and provides several recommendations that may improve the implementation of the merit system in Egypt. Moreover, this study adds to the limited literature on this topic in the Middle East.

Keywords Senior, Recruitment, Selection, Merit, Criteria

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Egypt is a developing country in the Middle East and North Africa, and it is a large country with the fourteenth highest population globally. Observations by Max Weber (2011) suggest that Egypt has one of the oldest bureaucracies in history. Moreover, Egypt is characterised by a relatively large bureaucracy, where the state’s administrative body is comprised of several ministries, authorities and local administration units; the number of public bodies is about 217, making it one of the largest administrative bodies in the world. On the other hand, the legislation regulating the state’s administrative body has swelled, where there are about 53,538 legislations in force, which leads to weak commitment to the legal frameworks...
regulating the state’s administrative body. This creates a backdoor for corruption and the exploitation of some legislative loopholes (El-Hosary, 2019).

Furthermore, Egypt is predestined to become from countries a high-income country and is economically planned to be capable of competing with other countries in 2030. Nonetheless, performance and bureaucratic governance have not put Egypt in a strategic place to compete. This is partly because the merit system for selecting public servants, particularly senior officials, has not been fully implemented. After the January 25, 2011 revolution, to improve recruitment and performance in the public sector, an administrative reform plan was developed in 2014, including essential pillars of the reform process, such as implementing merit-based recruitment, combating corruption and capacity-building. The law (No. 18 of 2015) is the legislative aspect of this plan (Mohamed Said Ahmed, 2016).

In this context, in recent decades, the Egyptian governments have taken various measures for administrative reform, such as adopting and reforming legislation to implement merit-based recruitment, where development in the system of selecting senior officials was introduced by legislation through law (No. 18 of 2015) instead of law (No. 5 of 1991), and modified by the decree of the Prime Minister (No. 781 of 2010). The previous law has been suspended since it did not provide an opportunity for community debate, and as a result, it has become distorted, and the new law (No. 81 of 2016) has been promulgated (Ismail, 2015).

The vision of the current law is to achieve justice among public servants, especially in the higher echelons. The law states the appointments must be based on a merit system without any interference. Therefore, the law affirms that the positions of senior officials are filled by appointment through a competition announced on the government portal. The appointment must be made through a selection committee (a decision of the competent authority appoints it) (Al Sheikh, 2019).

In this regard, the law (No. 81 of 2016) (2016) stipulated in article (No. 18) that in each ministry, a permanent under-secretary position at an excellent level will be formed to support the minister in carrying out his responsibilities. The law also excluded the selection of ministers’ assistants for a specified period by a decision issued by the Prime Minister. According to the Decree of the Prime Minister (No. 1216 of 2017) (2017), the candidates are evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. The qualifications include: obtaining academic degrees required, proficiency in foreign languages, computer skills and participating in conferences.

2. The Job History: Achievements achieved during the career path in tasks similar to the vacant.

3. Personal characteristics include leadership skills, decision-making capabilities, problem-solving techniques and communication skills.

4. The development proposal submitted by the candidate to the declared unit includes achievable objectives.

In addition, the concerned authorities ensure that the candidate possesses the qualities of integrity and that he meets the conditions for occupying the position according to the description card and obtains the required training. In the case of equality, preference is given to the younger candidate.

In light of contemporary evolutions, the attraction of qualified senior officials is more urgent today than ever. A variety of changes are occurring, including the growth of the state’s role in the economic, social and other areas; globalization; increasing competitiveness; and the requirement for a dependable government system to adapt to changes with a modern and efficient administration high quality of top officials (Ismail, 2015). The subject of senior officials’ merit-based selection becomes a decisive factor in achieving these goals efficiently.
and effectively; by virtue of their positions, they are organisational development tools (Holtom et al., 2008). In light of the importance of senior officials, the crucial task of selecting the right person for the job merit-based becomes all the more consequential. Also, the retirement of large numbers of senior officials in Egypt, possibly aided by early retirement, provides an opportunity for the hiring process to move in a more meritocratic direction (Assaad, 2019).

The paper investigates the main research question, which is:

To what extent are merit criteria applied in the selection of senior officials in the Egyptian public sector?

This paper seeks to obtain the following main objective:

(1) Identifying the reality of implementing merit criteria in selecting senior officials in the Egyptian public sector.

The paper acquires its importance as:

(2) The presenting some recommendations that will be revealed by the field study, which will hopefully contribute to properly implementing merit criteria in selecting senior officials in Egypt.

This paper is based on the following two hypotheses:

H1. There is no significant difference at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), in the respondents’ perspectives towards the implementation of merit criteria (examinations, interviews, justice and equality, and skills) in the selection of senior officials.

H2. There is no significant difference at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), in the respondents’ perspectives towards the selection of senior officials, due to the demographic characteristics and professional (gender, educational qualification, experience and age).

Subsequently, the paper examines its principal variables, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The issue of the conceptual framework is the dynamics of merit-based senior official selection to achieve the output of the merit system. The success or failure of merit-based senior selection is highly dependent on its being supported by accountability. The selection is also symbolic unless the independent variables (gender, educational qualification, experience and age) are clearly addressed and supported with the proper usage of merit criteria (examinations; interviews; equality and justice; skills). It is expected that senior officials are effective and professional because merit-based selection allows equal opportunity and motivates staff.

2. Literature review

2.1 The merit system

More than sixty years later, Michael Young’s vision of a meritocratic society in his book “The Rise of the Meritocracy” remains one of the most important visions for understanding the Meritocracy. According to Young’s vision, meritocracy is interpreted as a combination of intelligence and effort. This means a lazy person with high intelligence does not fall into the category of merit. In terms of action, it is often interpreted as working optimally. In this respect, meritocracy is used as a measure of corruption, where corrupt institutions are those that disobey the formula: merit = ability + effort (Allen, 2011).

On the other hand, many scholars in administration, public administration and various scientific disciplines have discussed the merit system (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016; Jost et al., 2008; McCourt, 2007; Poocharoen and Brillantes, 2013). In this respect, McCourt (2007) defines the merit system as selecting the best candidate for a vacant
position. Therefore, the best persons must occupy the vacancies because of their competence and quality, rather than their relative social class, gender, race and wealth. Similarly, Kinerja (2012) defines the merit system as a system for employment into job vacancies, based on applicants’ abilities, skills, experience and knowledge, but not on patrimony and kinship.

Essentially, it requires the achievement of the objectives of the merit system in employment to comprise the following phases:

Application: In this phase, vacancies are announced and the requirements for filling them are set. In this respect, researchers find that recruitment announcements effectively broaden the pool of potential applicants and increase the transparency of recruitment processes. Social media and e-recruitment have been professionalised in the application process and can strengthen merit recruitment (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).

Assessment: In this phase, the merit system used for employment has a competency framework that can evaluate candidates’ requirements for a job. Criteria may consist of skills, abilities, expertise, knowledge and education. Merit systems strive for criteria that are objective, specific and measurable. This can be a challenge for cognitive and behavioural competencies, which are harder to rank and assess but are increasingly vital as predictors of success, particularly at senior official levels (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).

In this context, formal qualification is an essential merit system element, besides, capabilities are acquired through training. Moreover, the merit system tests a person’s aptitude to perform in a job through abilities and skills such as analytical and strategic skills, time management and an inclusive leadership approach. Additionally, the evaluation of the experience is based on the quantity and quality of relevant experience required. However, the emphasis is typically on the calibre of the experience. Likewise, personal attributes are essential and are generally assessed on intelligence, commitment, reliability, initiative, integrity and honesty (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).
Essentially, examinations are the central part of the merit system’s recruitment, checking candidates’ competencies. There is a potent relationship between the examinations and how meritocracy determines who gets a job in the public sector. Written testing, such as multiple tests, increases the credibility and transparency of the selection process. In this respect, studies also indicate that the registration of oral examinations can help as a monitoring instrument. However, interviews should be accompanied by specific guidelines to conduct them (Uudelepp et al., 2018). Traditionally, the examination of candidates is preceded by the formation of examination and selection commissions. The quality of merit system recruitment depends in large part on the qualifications of the selection committees. Commissions play a critical role in the examination and selection stages to ensure equal treatment of candidates and effective screening of competencies to select the best. Merit-based recruitment requires that the formation of such selection commissions be independent and free from political interference (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).

Appointment: In this phase, many kinds of literature define the appointment as the phase in which political interference plays a role, through the final selection of a person from the candidate’s list (Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen, 2016).

In this respect, many of the results studies appear that the merit system explains professional management. Each individual is considered capable of advancement in their career due to their contributions to this system. This creates distributive justice in selecting persons on the merit system. The merit system has preserved equal opportunities for lower-level members of society to improve their economic class and get a decent position in a hierarchy, and it has implanted the doctrine that every person has an equal opportunity for selection as long as they can efficiently perform the tasks of the position (Uudelepp et al., 2018; Imbroscio, 2016).

Furthermore, meritocracy acts as a tool that maintains social order. Social justice is done when a balanced and organised society has been instituted, where every person has an equal opportunity to build a decent life (Irawan, 2017). In addition, meritocracy has been shown to reduce corruption. Having a meritocracy in place reduces nepotism and provides the necessary foundations to develop a culture of integrity, and that a merit-based selection system for seniors has led to more efficient practises in the public sector (Charron et al., 2017). In this respect, Cortazar et al. (2016) reached that meritocracy presents many benefits, where recruitment of persons with the right skills improves productivity and performance, leading to better service policies, which lead to better services, making for more prosperous societies.

Essentially, the above studies describe how the civil service becomes more systematic and rational if meritocracy is used in the recruitment process. The central assumption of this approach is that the selection system in the civil service must be able to recruit the best personnel and that meritocracy is the tool to achieve this end. However, the advantages of meritocracy have been criticized in that they are strangling the legitimate power of governments and impeding administrative responsiveness (Cardona and Eriksen, 2015).

Indeed, the tension between politicians and the implementation of the merit system in the recruitment of senior officials is a widely varied academic debate. Where Advocates of the merit system argue that the fulfilment of professional standards criteria builds institutional competence, which is necessary to achieve greater effectiveness in the making and implementation of policies and enhance public interests, which leads to curbing the abuse of power by politicians in public management (Olavarria and Dockendorff, 2016). On the other hand, the counterargument argues that the implementation of merit in the recruitment of senior officials and the professionalisation of public administration would be a source of danger to democracy and representative bureaucracy because senior officials in general not only play a policy implementation role but also make policy decisions they should not; and that the appointment of administration positions is a way of maintaining the electoral
machinery that enables parties to remain in government, to promote party interests, or as a means to create networks of political support (Olavarría and Dockendorff, 2016).

Indeed, reforms in countries with political patronage are highly affected by the practises undertaken in these systems, where reforms take place in a historical context that shapes and restricts the options for change (Grindle, 2012). Therefore, in developing countries, while bureaucratic interests and politics converge, and there is no clear demarcation between them, meritocratic reform is improbable (Schneider and Heredia, 2003). For example, AL-Drabkah (2009) concluded that the Jordanian case depends on selective criteria that are irrational and not objective in the recruitment of senior officials because of considering nepotism the main factor in the recruitment of senior officials. This means that most strategies for civil service are theoretical and well done in drafting, but there is a big gap between theory and practice.

Likewise, in Tunisia, the legal framework is well-designed for recruiting the most skilled candidates into the public sector based on competitive recruitment. In practice, direct, non-competitive recruitment was common during the post-revolution period. The divergence between the legal basis and its application allowed increased direct recruitment and bypassing of competitive exams. Senior official positions are not only awarded based on seniority but have become automatic in some ministries. Moreover, the bias towards hiring candidates with support from the dominant political party may have occasionally undermined the meritocratic nature of the system (Brockmeyer et al., 2015).

On the other hand, in Libya, conflicts of interest in recruitment, cronyism and nepotism were key traits before the Libyan revolution in 2011. Even after the revolution, there is still struggling with nepotism and public officials nourishing their own personal networks instead of working for an efficient public administration. Nepotism excludes qualified staff from employment in the civil service and creates a culture where public officials owe loyalty to the tribe that has led them to secure employment (Transparency International, 2015).

2.2 Recruitment and selection of senior bureaucratic officials

Recruitment is the process of attracting applicants for vacant positions according to the human resource plan at a minimum cost with the quality of persons required to satisfy the organization’s strategic needs. In contrast, selection implies judging candidates on measurable and objective criteria (Francis, 2014). Indeed, for effective recruitment and selection, there must be a clear policy to determine the vacancy requirements. The guarantee of being the right person at the right time in the right place is a critical factor in gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage. Effective recruitment relies on the degree to which an organisation supports an approach to HRM that focuses on the deployment and development of employees once they have gained entry into an organization. In doing this, there must be an intelligent use of recruitment channels. Thus, choosing the most suitable candidate is vital because an incorrect person could still be hired even though processes are in place. There should be sound reasons for choosing a particular person for the vacant post and not just randomly filling it (MDG, 2011).

In fact, every country has its own administrative recruitment system; Kuperus and Rode (2008) state that democratic countries, like the United States, officially open political and administrative positions to eligible candidates. They generally tend to be individuals with middle-class backgrounds or lower-class people who succeeded in acquiring a decent education. That is why only competence and knowledge are required in the recruitment process. In contrast, the recruitment process for senior officials’ positions in developing countries is often closed and not correctly formulated.

Regarding the senior officials’ recruitment, according to Geddes in Masdar (2008), there are four types of recruitment strategy proposed: The first type uses a partisan strategy, where, senior officials are recruited based on considerations of affiliations to rulers and political closeness; competence values are less considered. Additionally, party cadres are also
positioned in organisations considered strategic and crucial in determining the success of the ruler’s programs. The second type is called civil service reform, where the appointment of senior officials is made using the merit system requirements, taking allegiance and competence into consideration. The third type is called compartmentalization, i.e. a recruitment strategy utilizing the principle of political interference to select senior officials based on reviews of competence and loyalty. What distinguishes this type from the previous one is that in the bureaucratic strategic positions below them, particularly in organisations that the executive considers highly important and strategic, the selection is made by employing informal merit system considerations. The fourth type is described as instantaneous existence. Senior officials’ appointments are achieved through favouritism controlled by corroboratives of the executive.

In general, there are two types of employment systems: the career-based civil service system and the position-based civil service system. The first system’s purpose is to construct a cohesive civil service with senior officials who engage in the same culture, making working together and communicating across government organisations easier. The second system provides a lot of applicants who have special skills, which promotes competition. This system includes decentralization, making it easier to conform to competence requirements in different positions (Kuperus and Rode, 2008).

Moreover, in many countries, the employment system for senior officials differs from the recruitment system for the lower levels of the civil service (Afiouni et al., 2014). To improve the recruitment of senior officials, many countries with a career-based recruitment system resort to a position-based system for the recruitment of senior officials to select applicants based on merit for short-term appointments and from outside the organization, or corps. This is what is known as a hybrid system. Also, many countries with position-based systems resort to transforming elements of the system towards a career-based system to ensure some career path for the best employees and strengthen the corporate identity of the employees (Kuperus and Rode, 2008). For example, different selection procedures have been inserted in Ireland and Spain for the senior official’s recruitment to secure more experienced and efficient management staff. Fixed-term performance contracts are the most commonly used for the recruitment of senior officials in a career-based or hybrid system (Belgium) or external applicants for some of the old official’s jobs (Cyprus and Austria). Whereas in Hungary, senior officials are recruited based on their experience and managerial skills (Kuperus and Rode, 2008).

In fact, in developing countries, there is an absence of qualified cadres, so many countries perceive the most important task to be holding senior official positions with eligible professionals (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2016). This need justifies dependence on some distinctive features of the Mandarin model, which confirms the selection of old officials’ trained cadres. The Mandarin model is considered attractive despite its flaws, including a violation of the perceived approach to egalitarian values; the low credibility of elitist credentials (due to inferior quality training and educational institutions); and the absence of the second class of qualified leaders, whose support is essential to the successful performance of the senior official’s class (OECD, 2003).

A clearly defined hiring policy is crucial for both the administrators and applicants since a lot of information is available from recruitment. As Bratton (2007) described, many benefits are obtained from a clear recruitment policy, which helps the management determine the right time to announce jobs, how the selection is made and management priorities for consideration. These benefits are likely to be obtained if clear and specific rules are used in the recruitment process. These are adhering to the applicable regulations and legislation, focusing on merit-based recruitment, justice on selection and taking into account the role of the selection committee and the position of candidates in the recruitment process (Itika, 2011).
2.3 Representative bureaucracy
The theory of representative bureaucracy states that the bureaucracy’s demographic composition should mirror the public’s demographic composition. This means that the preferences of a plurality of people will be considered in decision-making by bureaucrats (Ricucci and Saidel, 1997). On the other hand, Kennedy (2013) stated that representative bureaucracy is a micro-miniature of society; thereby, it can become an administrative responsibility reinforced through senior officials’ responsive attitude towards the public. Furthermore, senior officials are believed to possess social backgrounds that influence the policies they formulate and implement, ultimately producing policies aspiring to by the public.

In recent years, the theory has been more precisely defined to include two types of representation: passive, where the bureaucracy has the exact demographic origins of the public it serves; and active, where bureaucrats act on behalf of the general population. The theory of functional representativeness states that the values based on the demographic background will translate into choices that benefit the public with similar origins (Ricucci and Saidel, 1997). In the context of active representation, a recent study finds that workforce diversity can be compatible with merit-based practices. Both are found to positively impact civil servants’ performance (Park and Liang, 2020).

On the other hand, in the context of passive representation, Ricucci and Saidel (1997) found in their study that, in most cases, women and people of colour are not well represented in top policy-making positions.

Recent experience with civil and military bureaucracies in India and South Africa, two highly pluralistic and conflict-prone societies, suggests that an ethnically representative bureaucracy contributes to the legitimacy of government by demonstrating that people of community can and do participate in the administration of public affairs. In most contemporary states, inter-ethnic relationships may be regulated through merit-based recruitment processes or power-sharing arrangements (Esman, 1999).

The merit principle is often the first sacrifice of power-sharing arrangements, being replaced with simple quota recruitment systems, especially in contested societies (Ricucci and Saidel, 1997). In this context, Egypt has taken numerous initiatives to facilitate women’s participation in the labour market and enhance their rights at work. These include measures that introduce flexible work options and encourage gender balance in corporate leadership, but through merit-based recruitment processes. This increased the percentage of women in senior official positions by 18%, and the government hopes to increase this percentage to 25% by 2030 (Capmas, 2020).

In conclusion of the literature review, the public sector needs to implement merit criteria in selecting senior officials to attract qualified ones. Also, it engenders a series of improvements in organizations’ internal management and practices, reduces corruption and makes public administration more effective.

3. The empirical analysis
3.1 Research methodology
The paper adopts the descriptive-analytical method, with a questionnaire to obtain the primary data to determine the respondents’ perceptions towards the implementation of merit criteria in the selection of senior officials in Egypt.

3.2 Data collection
Regarding data collection tools and sources, the study adopts secondary data collection tools by examining several literature pieces about the selection of senior officials. A questionnaire was adopted to collect the required primary data. The questionnaire was designed based on
the administrative literature in HRM (AL-Drabkah, 2009; Al-Shehri, 2002). And the Egyptian civil service system in general, and the merit criteria in particular. The questionnaire was developed using the five-point Likert scale as the measurement tool, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part is related to demographic information (gender, educational qualification, experience and age). As for the second part, it consisted of (33) statements revolving around merit criteria, and it consisted of the following variables:

1. Examinations are measured by statements (1–9).
2. Interviews are measured by statements (10–18).
3. Equality and justice are measured by statements (19–27).
4. Skills are measured by statements (28–33).

3.3 Methods of statistical analysis
The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. Analytical descriptive statistics were used, where measures of central tendency and dispersion were used to show the opinions and the respondents’ perceptions about the statements’ questionnaire, and a (T) test to find out the differences between two arithmetic means, and a (F) test to see if there were statistically significant differences between the values of the mean for the respondents’ answers. The univariate analysis of variance allows to know the impact of the demographic characteristics and professional on respondents’ perspectives towards selecting senior officials. The stability of the questionnaire variables was confirmed by the Cronbach’s alpha method, and the values were high, indicating the scale’s stability, as the overall stability coefficient reached (0.851). The closer the Cronbach’s alpha is to 1, the higher the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire (Sekaran, 2003).

Correlation coefficients were determined between the study’s statements tool and the corresponding measurement, as shown in Table A1, where the correlation coefficients swung between (0.46 and 0.85). The fourth and fifth statements in the examinations variable obtained the most significant correlation values (0.85). And the ninth statement got the lowest correlation value (0.73). As for the interviews variable, the fifth statement got the highest correlation value (0.79), and the ninth statement got the lowest correlation value (0.53). The fifth statement had the highest correlation value (0.72) in the justice and equality variable, and the seventh one had the lowest correlation value (0.46). The third, fourth, and sixth statements had the highest correlation values (0.67) in the skills variable, while the lowest was for the first statement (0.50). It is noted that all these values with statistical significance at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), and this indicates that these statements measure the criteria of merit used in the selection process of high-ranking senior officials satisfactorily and are appropriate as a basis for the study.

3.4 Population, sample and sample selection
The field survey was conducted in November 2020. The study population of senior officials consisted of the excellent degree members of (305) elements, the high degree (1,641) elements and the general director degree (5,654) elements (Capmas, 2020). Cochran’s formula was used to calculate the sample size, resulting in a sample size of 366 individuals. In an attempt to select a convenient and representative sample, disproportionate stratified random sampling was used to determine the sample. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed to the sample, and 380 responded, valid for statistical analysis, representing 76%. It is worth noting that the researcher distributed 500 questionnaires in anticipation of some sample members refusing to respond. It’s worth mentioning that all participants were selected and promoted within the time frame of the new law’s application in 2018, 2019 and 2020.
3.5 Demographic and professional characteristics of respondents

Table A2 shows that the sample surveyed included 81.1% of male participants, while 18.9% were female. About Age of participants is 3% for participants from 30 to less than 40 years and 53% for participants from 40 to less than 50 years, and 44% for more than 50 years. This reflects a negative feature of the Egyptian administrative system: the poor representation of women and youth in senior officials’ positions. The educational status of the respondents showed that 21% of them had an excellent diploma or less. 61.6% for a BSc. Master’s and doctorate (Ph.D) degrees were held by 13.7 and 3.7%, respectively. The high level of education of the sample can be explained by the fact that a bachelor’s degree is a pre-requisite for senior official positions. Finally, the experience is that 8.7% have experience of less than 5 years, 21.6% have experience of 6–10 years, 32.6% have experience of 11–16 years, 23.9% have experience of 17–21 years and 13.2% have experience of 22 years or above.

3.6 Data analysis

To analyse the study data on the extent to which merit criteria are applied in selecting senior officials according to the four variables (examinations, interviews, justice and equality, and skills). The descriptive analysis finds the mean, standard deviation and relevance ranking for the questionnaire’s responses. The respondents’ estimations were divided into three levels, based on the following equation: $(Upper\limits_{\text{limits}} – lower\limits_{\text{limits}})/number\limits_{\text{of\ levels}} = (5–1)/3 = 1.33$. $(1–2.33)$ indicates a low degree of relevance, and $(2.34–3.66)$ indicates a medium degree of relevance and $(3.67–5)$ indicates a high degree of relevance (Reis et al., 2000). And it was decided that the hypothetical mean should be at (3.50), considering that it represents 70 percent of the hypothetical high score, which is 5.

In response to the research question, according to the examination’s variable, Table A3 shows the mean of the respondents’ answers, which ranged between (2.36 and 3.04). It was determined that statement (9) had the highest mean (3.04). It was related to candidates’ ability to understand test results, followed by statement (2), which had a mean of (2.78) and included hyperlinks to the circular detailing the vacancies and the selection criteria. As for statement (6) related to the holding and management of examinations by a neutral party, it obtained the lowest mean (2.36), which indicates that examinations are held within institutions. It should be emphasised that the examinations did not focus on job duties and responsibilities, as the relevant statement also received a mean of (2.40). Examinations are not corrected by an impartial and specialised committee, as the mean of the respondents’ answers to the relevant statement was (2.44). In general, the variable of examinations indicates that examinations are held, but their results are not taken too seriously into account when making a selection, according to the scale adopted in the study methodology, where the mean reached (2.63).

It is noted that all $(7)$ values are negative; this means that the mean of the respondents’ perceptions about statements in this variable is less than the mean adopted, according to a scale the study methodology, with statistically significant differences at level $(\alpha \leq 0.05)$. This means, according to the respondents’ perceptions, there is no strong correlation between the examinations and the selection of senior officials.

Regarding the interview’s variable, Table A4 presents that the mean of the respondents’ answers ranged between (2.16 and 3.78). Statement (17) obtained the highest mean (3.78) from the respondents’ answers and related that the level of interview questions was the same for all candidates as it received a high response. It was followed by a statement (18) related to knowing the true intentions of the candidates, with a mean of (3.42), which is not statistically significant. As for the visibility and foresight of the candidates, it got a poor response, where the statement (15) got the lowest mean of (2.16). It was found that there was no focus on the knowledge and ability of the candidates, their reactions and responses, as the related statement got a mean of (2.55). In general, the variable of interviews indicates that interviews are held, but it is not effective enough, as the mean reached (2.86).
It is noted that most \( (T) \) values are negative; this means that the mean of the respondents’ perceptions about statements in this variable is less than the mean adopted, according to a scale the study methodology, with statistically significant differences at level \( \alpha \leq 0.05 \). This means that, according to the respondents’ perceptions, there is no strong correlation between the interviews and the selection of senior officials.

As for the justice and equality variable, Table A5 indicates that the mean of the respondents’ answers ranged between (2.99 and 3.31). Statements (22, 23, 24) obtained the highest mean of (3.31), which means that a certain quota for women is likely to be set in the senior official’s positions and treat all candidates equally without discrimination of race, religion or origin. Nepotism is not an essential factor in the final selection. At the same time, statement (27) expressing the adoption of the recommendations of reliable references on the candidate’s behaviour and honesty got the lowest mean of (2.99) compared with the rest of the statements’ variable. In general, justice and equality, according to the respondents’ perceptions, are achieved, but not significantly, where the mean is (3.18).

It is noted that all values of \( (T) \) are negative. This means that the mean of the respondents’ perceptions about statements variable is less than the mean adopted, according to a scale the study methodology, with statistically significant differences at level \( \alpha \leq 0.05 \). This means, according to the respondents’ perceptions, that justice and equality are not applied as stated in the law, which stipulates that the concerned authorities ensure that the candidate possesses the qualities of integrity and that he meets the conditions for occupying the position according to the description card.

Finally, according to the skills variable, Table A6 illustrates that the mean of responses ranged between (3.04 and 3.45). Statement (32), which expresses the consideration of participation in training courses as one of the selection criteria, obtained the highest mean of (3.45). As for the least essential statements (30 and 33) with a mean of (3.04) related to taking the performance reports and taking skills results as criteria for selection. The research scale generally reveals that the abilities variable is taken into account and on a mean basis (3.18).

It is noted that all values of \( (T) \) are negative. This means that the mean of the respondents’ perceptions about statements variable is less than the mean adopted, according to a scale the study methodology, with statistically significant differences at level \( \alpha \leq 0.05 \), meaning that according to the respondents’ perceptions there is no a strong correlation between the skills and selection the selection of senior officials, despite the Decree of the Prime Minister (No. 1216 of 2017) (2017) regarding the criteria for evaluating candidates according to their job history through the achievements they have achieved during their career and obtaining the required training.

3.7 Testing the research hypotheses

To accomplish the objectives of the study, the research set out the following two hypotheses:

H1. There is no significant difference at the significance level \( \alpha \leq 0.05 \), in the respondents’ perspectives towards the implementation of merit criteria (examinations, interviews, justice and equality, and skills) in the selection of senior officials.

The One-Sample \( T \)-test was used to test the hypothesis and obtain the mean of the respondents’ perceptions towards the variables of merit criteria. The hypothesis is rejected if the significance of the model is less than 0.05 and vice versa.

Table A7 shows that the calculated \( (T) \) value \((-20.99)\) is less than the tabular value \((1.96)\), and has significant significance at the level \( \alpha \leq 0.05 \), which indicates that the mean of the respondents’ perceptions about examinations, interviews, justice and equality, and skills \((2.94)\) is less than the hypothetical mean, according to the scale adopted in the study.
methodology, which means there are no statistically significant differences between the respondents’ perceptions towards the variables of applying merit criteria to selecting senior officials at the ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), level of significance. This means rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting the study hypothesis. This means that merit criteria are not always applied, but sometimes.

$H2$. There is no significant difference at the significance level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), in the respondents’ perspectives towards the selection of senior officials, due to the demographic characteristics and professional (gender, educational qualification, experience and age).

To test this hypothesis, the univariate analysis of variance was used to determine the impact of the demographic characteristics and professional qualifications on respondents’ perspectives towards the selection of senior officials.

Table A8 shows that there are no statistically significant differences at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$); between the mean the respondents’ perceptions towards application of merit criteria in the selection of senior officials due to gender and age, while we find that there is an effect of the educational qualification and the experience variables. Whereas, the value of ($F$) is statistically significant at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$), in the sense that the respondents’ perceptions differ according to educational qualification and experience. The Tukey test was conducted for dimensional comparisons to clarify the differences in the mean according to educational qualification and experience, and it was found that there are statistically significant differences at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$); in favour of the level of bachelor’s degree holders in comparison with other educational levels. At the level of experience, it was discovered that respondents with less than five years of experience had more favourable sentiments than their counterparts in the other groups.

4. Conclusion and recommendations
The main objective of this study was to identify the reality of the implementation of merit criteria in the selection of senior officials in the Egyptian public sector. The study reached the following findings and recommendations:

4.1 Empirical findings
(1) Competitive examinations are held among the candidates and corrected by an impartial body, with a mean of (2.63). It means that the examinations are not administered and corrected by an impartial and specialised committee.

(2) Personal interviews are conducted with candidates for vacant positions to find out their abilities and responses, with a mean of (2.86). This reveals that the interviews do not significantly focus on the knowledge, ability, reactions and responses of the candidates.

(3) All applicants for open positions are evaluated based on justice and equality to allow candidates to advance and compete, with a total mean of (3.18). It means that all applicants are treated equally without discrimination of race, religion, or origin, and mediation is not considered an essential factor in the final selection. The percentage of women in senior official positions is still low.

(4) Candidates’ skills for vacant positions, such as computer skills, English language proficiency and participation in training courses, are taken into account when selecting senior officials, with a mean score of (3.18).
Merit criteria are generally applied, as the mean of (2.94).

It was found that there were no statistically significant differences at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the mean of the respondents’ perceptions towards the application of merit criteria due to gender and age. At the same time, there are differences attributed to educational qualification and experience.

4.2 Recommendations and future agenda

Based on the results mentioned above, the study has made the following recommendations:

1. Reconsidering the procedures of competitive examinations and interviews to ensure fairness and objectivity among candidates while maximising the role of the Capacity Assessment and Testing Centre in conducting electronic examinations. Using this centre’s evaluation as one of the primary criteria for selecting senior officials.

2. To promote justice and equality among candidates, it is necessary to ensure the impartiality and complete independence of the selection committees through their non-formatting by the competent authorities. They must be formed by the Central Agency for Organisation and Administration, provided that they are created for long periods and are trained to improve their professional efficiency. It is recommended that academic experts be included in selection committees to enhance external oversight and the integrity of recruitment procedures.

3. Adopting more transparency and justice in the treatment of applicants for vacant positions.

4. Consider developing the skills of the female component and giving them greater opportunities to assume leadership positions commensurate with their numbers.

5. The significance of adhering to the norms of the civil service system regarding the application of merit criteria in filling the senior officials’ positions.

6. Finally, Future Agenda: When considering the positive effects of meritocratic recruitment, as discussed in the literature, it is worth seeking ways in which merit-based selection of senior officials can be bolstered in Egypt. Further research, using larger samples, especially Law (No. 81 of 2016), is recent and requires years to implement. And it should use qualitative methodology through interviews with experts, especially those who participated in law making. Additionally, other human resource management issues must be addressed, such as transfer, secondment, training and performance. Consideration should also be given to international comparisons that can provide broader evidence of how merit practise has changed over time.

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**Further reading**

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Appendix

Research tables

Table A1.
Correlation coefficients between the items of the study tool and the total score

| Statement number in the variable | Examination | Interviews | Equality and justice | Skills |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------------|----------------------|--------|
| 1                                | 0.82        | 0.74       | 0.59                 | 0.50   |
| 2                                | 0.84        | 0.65       | 0.62                 | 0.61   |
| 3                                | 0.82        | 0.77       | 0.55                 | 0.67   |
| 4                                | 0.85        | 0.78       | 0.63                 | 0.67   |
| 5                                | 0.85        | 0.79       | 0.72                 | 0.54   |
| 6                                | 0.83        | 0.56       | 0.64                 | 0.67   |
| 7                                | 0.83        | 0.68       | 0.46                 |        |
| 8                                | 0.77        | 0.77       | 0.57                 |        |
| 9                                | 0.73        | 0.53       | 0.60                 |        |

Note(s): All values are statistically significant at level ($\alpha \leq 0.05$)

Table A2.
Demographic and professional characteristics of respondents

|                          | %    | Number |
|--------------------------|------|--------|
| Gender                   |      |        |
| Male                     | 81.1 | 308    |
| Female                   | 18.9 | 72     |
| Age                      |      |        |
| 30- Less than 40 years   | 3    | 11     |
| 40- Less than 50 years   | 53   | 201    |
| 50 years or above        | 44   | 168    |
| The educational level    |      |        |
| Diploma or less          | 21   | 80     |
| BSc                      | 61.6 | 234    |
| Master                   | 13.7 | 52     |
| PhD                      | 3.7  | 14     |
| Experience               |      |        |
| Less than 5 years        | 8.7  | 33     |
| 6–10 years               | 21.6 | 82     |
| 11–16 years              | 32.6 | 124    |
| 17–21 years              | 23.9 | 91     |
| 22 years or above        | 13.2 | 50     |
| Rank | Statements                                                                                     | Mean  | SD    | T     | Sig  |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 16   | Candidates are given the opportunity to review examinations results                           | 3.04  | 1.18  | -7.6  | 0.00 |
| 21   | The circular includes the criteria and basis for the selection of senior officials             | 2.78  | 1.30  | -10.80| 0.00 |
| 22   | Vacancies are advertised                                                                       | 2.75  | 1.35  | -10.83| 0.00 |
| 24   | Competitive examinations are held for the selection of senior officials                        | 2.69  | 1.09  | -14.50| 0.00 |
| 26   | Examinations results are shown to all candidates                                               | 2.60  | 1.13  | -15.53| 0.00 |
| 27   | The stated criteria and foundations for the selection of senior officials are adhered          | 2.59  | 1.15  | -15.43| 0.00 |
| 30   | Examinations are corrected by a specialized and impartial committee                           | 2.44  | 1.18  | -17.51| 0.00 |
| 31   | Emphasis is focus on the duties and tasks of the vacant positions                              | 2.40  | 1.22  | -17.58| 0.00 |
| 32   | Examinations are held and administered by an impartial body                                     | 2.36  | 1.19  | -18.68| 0.00 |
|      |                                                                                               | 2.63  | 0.98  | -17.31| 0.00 |

**Table A3.** Mean, SD and level of application in the examinations variable

| Rank | Statements                                                                                     | Mean  | SD    | T     | Sig  |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 1    | Interview questions are of the same level for all candidates                                    | 3.78  | 2.31  | 2.4   | 0.02 |
| 3    | Interviews focus on knowing the true intentions of the candidates in their selection of jobs   | 3.42  | 1.06  | -1.47 | 0.14 |
| 19   | Personal interviews are conducted with job candidates                                           | 2.95  | 1.23  | -8.72 | 0.00 |
| 20   | Specialized and impartial committees are formed to interview the candidates                    | 2.88  | 1.12  | -10.79| 0.00 |
| 23   | Interviews focus on the tasks and duties of the vacant position                                 | 2.70  | 1.05  | -14.85| 0.00 |
| 25   | Interviews focus on the availability of leadership features for candidates                     | 2.67  | 1.08  | -14.98| 0.00 |
| 28   | Interviews focus on the knowledge and ability of job candidates                                 | 2.58  | 1.14  | -15.73| 0.00 |
| 29   | Interviews focus on the reaction and response of candidates                                     | 2.55  | 1.07  | -17.31| 0.00 |
| 33   | Interviews focus on knowing the vision and foresight of candidates                               | 2.16  | 1.16  | -22.52| 0.00 |
|      |                                                                                               | 2.86  | 0.84  | -14.85| 0.00 |

**Table A4.** Mean, SD and level of application in the interviews variable

| Rank | Statements                                                                                     | Mean  | SD    | T     | Sig  |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 6    | Women are given a certain quota to fill senior official positions                               | 3.31  | 0.98  | -3.78 | 0.00 |
| 5    | All candidates are treated equally without discrimination of race, religion or origin          | 3.31  | 0.96  | -3.86 | 0.00 |
| 4    | Nepotism is not a key factor in the final selection of senior officials                          | 3.31  | 0.91  | -4.07 | 0.00 |
| 7    | The principles and criteria for the selection of senior officials are objective and appropriate  | 3.27  | 0.95  | -4.72 | 0.00 |
| 9    | A clean employee’s record is a key criterion for the selection                                 | 3.24  | 1.02  | -4.97 | 0.00 |
| 11   | The principles of occupying senior official positions are adhered to stipulated in the regulations and instructions | 3.15  | 0.93  | -7.34 | 0.00 |
| 15   | Seniority is taken in class when the selection of senior officials                              | 3.04  | 1.09  | -8.23 | 0.00 |
| 17   | All department heads are given the opportunity to apply to fill senior officials position        | 3.02  | 1.12  | -8.35 | 0.00 |
| 18   | The reports and recommendations of authoritative references about the conduct and honesty of the candidate are a basic criterion for the selection | 2.99  | 1.14  | -8.72 | 0.00 |
|      |                                                                                               | 3.18  | 0.57  | -10.94| 0.00 |

**Table A5.** Mean, SD, T and level in the equality and justice variable
Table A6. Mean, SD, T and level in the skills variable

Table A7. Mean, SD, T for the merit criteria

Note(s): The tabular value of “T” at the degrees of freedom (379) and the level of significance (0.05) = 1.96

Table A8. The univariate analysis of variance for demographic variables

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