

Resilient Governance in the Age of Populism: Strengthening Public Administration Integrity Through Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA)

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ABSTRACT

On July 27, 2023, the Prime Minister of Malaysia announced the Madani Economy initiative, aimed at making the country economically competitive by promoting balanced, inclusive, and value-driven growth. To respond to these goals, the government marked public sector reform as a critical strategy and aimed to promote trust in the government through effective governance and agility in service delivery. Therefore, the government has proposed the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA), which will be implemented starting December 1, 2024, and will enhance service delivery with an improved structure of the public service. The SSPA introduces comprehensive improvements in performance assessment and talent development, with particular emphasis on productivity enhancement and value integration. The SSPA is established based on five (5) quick-win initiatives that aim to increase the productivity of civil servants by promoting values and adopting technology. This study examines the role of the SSPA in enforcing key values of public service in terms of accountability, professionalism, and fairness in a changing political environment and how they continue to provide the best services to the people. The main aim of these efforts is to sustain public services' apolitical quality. The study is based on information found on official government websites, information collected with the participation of civil servants in different parts of the country during stakeholder consultations, and a review of major policy and strategy documents. The results suggest that the enhancement of bureaucratic integrity in terms of better governance and value promotion in public service is a key issue in addressing today's challenges. Finally, improving bureaucratic integrity is a mandatory step towards improving governance, institutional trust, and the long-term confidence of the population, especially in light of the complexity of the interactions between populism and public administration.

INTRODUCTION

The shifting political environment and impetus of emerging technologies have radically transformed governance on a global scale. In democracies, populist movements have taken the stage, confronting bureaucratic institutions and undermining confidence in government authorities (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Societies are facing compounding economic, climatic, health, and geopolitical shocks that combine to create a polycrisis in which disruptive influences are reinforced by one another (Tooze, 2022). To make matters even more complicated, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) of artificial intelligence, automation, and ubiquitous connectivity is challenging the nature of how states provide and control public services (Schwab, 2016), and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in preparedness and response, highlighting the necessity to enhance the capacity to govern and the resilience of provided public services (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2021). Such pressures put public administration in a

critical position, requiring it to adapt to uncertainty, legitimacy, performance, and integrity (Baimenov and Liverakos, 2025).

The framing of populism in the Malaysian context intensifies the traditional pressures on civil services. The governance system in Malaysia outlines that Malaysian government officials remain impartial and non-partisan. Public administrators are expected to maintain a neutral posture at all times, ensuring that day-to-day administration remains free from electoral competition and fostering trust in the bureaucratic decision-making process, thereby institutionalizing integrity. A combination of factors, including the demand for neutrality, turbulent policies, integrity competitions, and information-environment shocks, influences the design and implementation of reforms.

Technology governance has emerged concurrently. The emergence of AI presents the Malaysian public administration with a twofold challenge: to reap the benefits of increased productivity and quality of service and to protect its neutrality, due process, and the trust of citizens. Malaysia has laid a normative and institutional foundation: the National AI Roadmap 2021–2025 sets directions for capabilities and use cases; the National Guidelines on AI Governance & Ethics (AIGE, 2024) articulate principles of safety, accountability, privacy, transparency, and human benefit; the National AI Office (NAIO), launched in December 2024, centralizes coordination and is developing a 2026–2030 action plan; and the Public Sector AI Adaptation Guidelines (February 2025) translate principles into roles, risk management, and implementation scaffolds for ministries.

On July 27, 2023, the Prime Minister launched the MADANI Economy: Empowering the People, setting a framework to rebuild resilience and inclusivity (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2023). In September 2023, the government reformulated the Mid-Term Review of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) to indicate MADANI Economy priorities and accelerate the process of improving governance and service delivery (Economic Planning Unit, 2023). To supplement these instructions, the government provided extensive reforms in the area of public service: the Sistem Saraan Perkhidmatan Awam (SSPA) came into effect on December 1, 2024, reorganizing the elements of remuneration and performance, and the Agenda Reformasi Perkhidmatan Awam (ARPA), which was announced in early 2025 (Bernama, 2024; Public Service Department [JPA], 2025), is a comprehensive strategic framework outlined to strengthen the public service delivery system towards being more efficient, with integrity and focused on the people.

This study identifies the efforts of the Malaysian public administration to address populism, the overlap of global polycrises, and swift technological development and places them within clear theoretical frameworks: Public Value Theory (PVT), Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT), and Mission-Oriented Governance. Thus, it combines current policy trends, such as the MADANI Economy and the RMK-12 mid-term realignment, with administrative reforms such as the SSPA and ARPA to explain how these initiatives are expected to improve service delivery, enhance bureaucratic integrity, and build adaptability capacity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review maps Malaysia's public service reform with a frame of what governments should pursue—Public Value Theory (PVT)—and how they endure and adapt—Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT)—together with Mission-oriented Governance as an operational logic for embedding societal goals into policy instruments (Moore, 1995; Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2021; Mazzucato, Kattel, & Ryan-Collins, 2022; Osborne et al., 2022). It also elaborates Malaysia-specific policy trajectories that translate these ideas into practice: the Madani Economy and the RMK12 Mid-Term Review, and public-

service reform via SSPA/ARPA (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2023; Economic Planning Unit, 2023; Bernama, 2024; Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam [JPA], 2025).

Madani Economy: Empowering the People

With the public sector reform being one of the pillars, a fresh commitment to inclusive, balanced, and value-driven growth was announced by the launch of the Madani Economy initiative on 27 July 2023. The objectives of this framework are twofold: (i) to restructure the economy so that Malaysia becomes an economic power in the Asian region and (ii) to enhance the quality of life of people. It is designed on three key pillars, such as raising the ceiling (competitiveness and innovation), improving governance and reform of the public sector (institutional integrity and service delivery), and raising the floor (inclusiveness and equity), which are also supported by six core MADANI values: sustainability, well-being, creativity, respect, confidence, and compassion (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2024). Osborne (2022) also highlights the significance of values-based administration in order to make sure that the services are efficient as well as ethical and human-centred. In this study, we focus on Pillar 2: Improving Governance as an important element in enforcing agile and straddling service delivery, thereby spearheading the realization of national aspirations.

With its focus on good governance, instilling good values into serving the people, enhancing agility, and collaboration, the MADANI Economy framework will help public administration become more resilient. All of these combined contribute to the establishment of trust, enhancement of transparency, and responsiveness, which are all essential in reducing the impact of populism and enhancing the integrity of the governance process.

Enhancing the Efficiency of Public Service Delivery in the Context of the 12th Malaysia

Plan (RMK12): The Mid-Term Review

The Mid-Term Review of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12) highlights the idea that the transformation in the public sector should be supported with the strategies that facilitate human capital development, digitalisation, improved governance practices, and better budgetary and project management systems (Economic Planning Unit [EPU], 2023).

To fill these gaps, the orientation of the period 2023-2025 is expressed in five main reform priorities: (i) strengthening value-based governance, (ii) increasing human capital, (iii) accelerating digital transformation, (iv) reinforcing institutional and business frameworks, and (v) improving budgetary and project management. These priorities are supported by new initiatives, such as the development of the Ombudsman Act, the revision of the Audit Act 1957, the development of the centralized main data repository (PADU), and the concept of Government Technology (GovTech) to ensure comprehensive modernization of service delivery. In line with these structural changes, elements of integrity and transparency continue to play a key role, with the introduction of a new integrity plan, legal reforms to combat corruption, and the development of leadership among civil servants due to competency.

Altogether, the process of transformation in the public sector powered by RMK12 involves, in addition to systemic and structural change, the development of virtuous values, digital innovation, and greater human capital skills. This is also in line with the Malaysian MADANI framework, which emphasizes transparency, accountability, sustainability, and societal well-being as principles of governance. These measures can increase trust in public institutions and make the delivery of public services more nimble,

transparent, and efficient, contributing to the vision of Malaysia as a high-income nation by the end of the RMK12.

Agenda Reformasi Perkhidmatan Awam (ARPA)

To support wider development goals in Malaysia, the government introduced the Public Service Reform Agenda (ARPA) as a multipurpose transformation plan to enhance the effectiveness, integrity, and competitiveness of public service. The Mid-Term Review of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK-12) highlighted endemic issues that impede the effectiveness of the public sector, such as governance weaknesses, obstacles in the development of human capital, slow digital technology adoption, lack of fiscal space, and project management.

In response, ARPA was initiated with the idea of creating a public service that is agile, transparent, inclusive, and performance-driven, which aligns with the values of Malaysia MADANI, which stipulates integrity, accountability, well-being, and sustainability as the foundation of national development. ARPA is organized with five pillars: (i) Value-Based Governance, (ii) Strengthening Public Service Human Capital, (iii) Accelerating Digital Transformation, (iv) Strengthening Institutional and Business Frameworks, and (v) Improving Budget and Project Management. This study highlights two pillars (value-based governance and strengthening public service human capital) that focus on promoting resilient and credible governance (Bernama, 2024).

Collectively, ARPA is a radical initiative that incorporates values-based governance, human capital development, digitalization, institutional transformation, and fiscal administration to empower the Malaysian government across its range of services. When applied in its entirety, ARPA can make the Malaysian public service a primary driver of national change, which will contribute to the realisation of the national goal of becoming a developed, sustainable, and inclusive nation by 2025.

Sistem Saraan Perkhidmatan Awam (SSPA)

SSPA was introduced to replace the Malaysian Remuneration System (SSM) and was initially implemented in 2002. With over 20 years of practice, a comprehensive review of the system is necessary. This was in sync with the realignment of Malaysia's aspirations, as expressed in policies such as the Madani Economy, the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12), and the Mid-Term Review (KSP RMK12).

Under the SSPA, three mutually reinforcing strategies guide reform. First, raising public servants' disposable income through a rationalized pay structure, targeted adjustments, and performance-linked recognition ensures fair and transparent compensation that keeps pace with job demands and living costs. Second, reducing the government's fiscal burden for pension benefits, including parametric changes and a shift toward contribution-based arrangements, improves medium-term sustainability and budget predictability without compromising retirement adequacy. Third, lifting productivity via value cultivation (*pembudayaan nilai*) and technology adaptation focuses on competency-based development, ethical professionalism, and the systematic adoption of digital tools (process automation, data-driven management, and AI-assisted workflows) to streamline operations and improve service quality. Together, these strategies align incentives, safeguard integrity, and translate into a more capable, fiscally responsible, and citizen-centered public service.

The SSPA focuses on three major areas: organizational development, remuneration sustainability, and talent management. Organizational development focuses on reforming the service structure and

schemes, which involves standardizing job and salary grades, reviewing minimum entry qualifications, and rationalizing the service schemes. Remuneration sustainability deals with wage levels, the rationality of allowances, and balancing fiscal obligations, especially emoluments and pensions. Talent management emphasizes performance appraisals, career advancement, performance-based rewards, discipline measures, and the inculcation of ethical values, both psychologically and behaviorally. Table 1 highlights the national agenda and its reform initiatives in relation to addressing challenges in governance and bureaucratic integrity. This study focuses on specific initiatives for reforming talent management.

Table 1: National Agendas and its Reform Initiatives

National Agenda	Reform Initiatives
MADANI Economy Framework	• Good governance. • Agile and collaborative public delivery systems.
Mid-Term Review of RMK12	Enhancing the efficiency of public service delivery.
ARPA	Building a competent, competitive, and strategically oriented public sector workforce.
SSPA	• Raising public servants' disposable income. • Reducing the government's fiscal burden on pension benefits. • Lifting productivity via value cultivation and technology adaptation.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, discussions are based on Public Value Theory (PVT), Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT), and mission-oriented governance. PVT provides a normative lens, which locates reforms like the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA) in the larger goal of establishing societal value, which includes accountability, professionalism, fairness, and public legitimacy (Moore, 1995; Osborne et al., 2022; Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2022). Simultaneously, IRT offers an analytical model of how institutions can absorb shocks, adjust to political and social shocks, and remain stable over time (Ansell, Sorensen, & Torfing, 2021).

Public Value Theory (PVT)

PVT reframes success in public administration from narrow efficiency to the creation of societal value, organized through Moore's Strategic Triangle: substantive value, legitimacy and support, and operational capacity (Moore, 1995). Read against the SSPA, this translates into accountability, professionalism, and fairness as value outcomes that must be publicly endorsed and administratively sustained, consistent with a values-based, human-centered ethos (Osborne et al., 2022) and a mission orientation that embeds ethical and societal goals into design and delivery (Mazzucato et al., 2022).

Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT)

IRT explains how institutions endure shocks and adapt, combining robustness (continuity of core functions) with adaptability (reconfiguration under change) (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2021). Empirical work highlights enabling conditions: preparedness, adaptive leadership, stakeholder engagement, institutional quality, social capital, innovation, strategic planning, human capital, and transparency (Horák,

2024; Khadka et al., 2024; Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2021). Framed this way, the SSPA functions as a resilience-building reform (talent, performance, technology), while mission-oriented governance supports cognitive resilience by sustaining perceptions of fairness and professionalism (Mazzucato et al., 2022).

Mission-Oriented Governance

Mission-oriented governance positions the state as an active shaper of markets and outcomes, aligning ethical principles, inclusivity, and long-term missions with policy instruments and investment portfolios (Mazzucato, Kattel, & Ryan-Collins, 2022). In politically volatile settings, it redefines professionalism as managing complexity with neutrality and integrity and operationalizes fairness via inclusive policy design—thereby reinforcing legitimacy and trust.

Integrating PVT, IRT, and Mission Orientation

By integrating these lenses—Public Value Theory (PVT) and Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT), operationalised through Mission-oriented Governance—this paper positions the SSPA as both a value-creating and resilience-building reform designed to uphold the neutrality, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of Malaysia’s public administration. This two-pillar framework highlights the interdependence of integrity and resilience: without value-driven integrity, resilience risks devolving into inertia, while without resilience, value-driven reforms may falter under political or social strain. Supported by Moore (1995), Osborne et al. (2022), Mazzucato et al. (2022), and recent resilience scholarship (Ansell et al., 2021; Profiroiu & Nastacă, 2021; Horák, 2024; Khadka et al., 2024; Abdillah et al., 2025; Weiss,

2024), the analysis demonstrates how governance reforms can foster robust, apolitical, and trustworthy institutions capable of sustaining public confidence in the era of populism. The conceptual framework illustrates how the Public Service Remuneration System (SSPA) strengthens governance by coupling PVT’s value creation with IRT’s adaptive capacity, operationalized through mission-oriented governance. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between SSPA, the PVT, the IRT and Mission-oriented Governance.

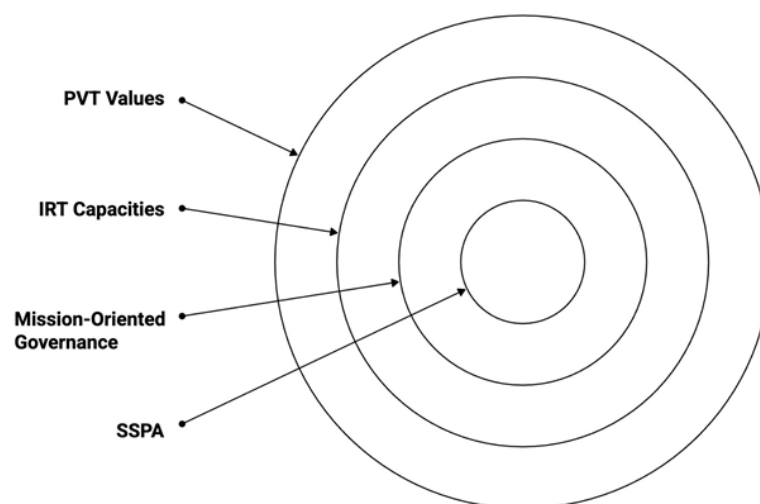


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Linking SSPA with Public Value Theory (PVT), Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT) and Mazzucato’s mission-oriented governance

METHODOLOGY/ APPROACH

Design

The formulation of the Sistem Saraan Perkhidmatan Awam (SSPA) followed a participatory, multi-method qualitative policy design approach, combining nationwide briefings, an open e-consultation portal, focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders, and document analysis of union memoranda, followed by tiered committee deliberation. This blend of channels aligns with established guidance on inclusive participation and the legitimacy of public-sector reform (Bryson, Quick, Slotterback, & Crosby, 2013; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; OECD, 2020; Rowe & Frewer, 2005).

Setting and Participants

Engagement was conducted across all federal ministries and states to surface priorities and options in light of four contemporaneous challenges: (i) slower growth in public servants' disposable income compared to the cost of living; (ii) the need to raise public service productivity; (iii) the government's rising fiscal burden from emoluments and retirement benefits; and (iv) a system-wide imperative to strengthen values and integrity within the civil service. These problem statements were presented during ministry/state briefings, echoed through SSPA Portal submissions, explored in stakeholder FGDs, and reflected in union memoranda—shaping both the participant profile and the scope of inputs considered in the SSPA formulation process.

Data Sources and Collection

Four data streams informed the design: (1) issues and options recorded during ministry/state briefings; (2) portal submissions on SSPA features and SSM challenges; (3) FGDs with stakeholder cohorts; and (4) union memoranda treated as policy documents. Qualitative public administration research has established the use of FGDs and document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Guest, Namey, & McKenna, 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Analytical Frame and Procedures

For analytic tractability, the project team was organized into three substantive domains—organizational development, remuneration sustainability, and talent development—which also served as the coding framework. Inputs from briefings, the portal, FGDs, and memoranda were classified into one or more domains and examined using qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurrent issues, proposed remedies, and areas of convergence/divergence. The approach followed recognised guidance on reflexive/codebook thematic analysis, transparent coding, and iterative theme development (Braun & Clarke,

2006, 2022; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Saldaña, 2021). Each domain team prepared synthesis notes summarizing the themes and policy implications.

SSPA Portal: Data and Analysis

This study also employed qualitative thematic analysis on data collected through the SSPA Portal, established by the Public Service Department (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, JPA) as a nationwide engagement platform to gather feedback, proposals, and aspirations of public servants on remuneration reform. The portal was open from 29 July 2023 to 29 February 2024 (seven months later). During this

period, 48,032 respondents submitted 126,599 proposals, reflecting widespread engagement across the service. Two types of information were captured: (i) demographics (e.g., service group, scheme of service, professional background) and (ii) substantive proposals outlining expectations of SSPA.

Given the volume, the analysis was structured around six major service clusters—Management and Professional, Health, Science and Technology, Technical, Security, and Education—and further disaggregated by the scheme of service to enable granular comparisons. Proposals were then mapped to the portal's three domains (organizational development, sustainability of remuneration, and talent development), with recurring issues within each domain organized into thematic categories, compared across clusters to identify convergences and divergences, and finally consolidated to provide a comprehensive overview of reform priorities.

Governance and Decision Process

Draft options and thematic syntheses progressed through a three-tier committee sequence: *Jawatankuasa Kerja* (Working Committee) for consolidation and problem–solution mapping; *Jawatankuasa Teknikal* (Technical Committee) for feasibility assessment and cross-domain coherence; and *Jawatankuasa Induk* (Steering Committee) for final decisions. Such tiered deliberation reflects contemporary recommendations for structured, future-regarding collective decision-making in public settings (Bryson et al., 2013; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; OECD, 2020).

Promulgation and Post-Circular Engagement

Upon agreement at the steering level, a *Pekeliling* (circular) dated September 13, 2024, announced implementation from December 1, 2024, specifying that opting from SSM to SSPA is voluntary. Following the circular, the team conducted a second nationwide engagement round across ministries and states to socialize the reform and address implementation queries, consistent with participation research, emphasizing feedback loops and closure on decisions (Fung, 2006; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

Quality Assurance

Methodological rigour was supported by triangulation across engagement modes (briefings, portals, FGDs, and memos) and organizational triangulation (three-domain teams). Deliberative validation occurred through the committee sequence, providing an auditable chain from stakeholder input to policy decision and supporting trustworthiness criteria in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

In summary, the SSPA formulation combined broad-based engagement, multiple data streams, and a structured decision pathway to generate a transparent evidentiary basis for reform. Inputs gathered through nationwide briefings, the SSPA Portal, stakeholder FGDs, and union memoranda were classified into three substantive domains and analysed thematically, with quality strengthened by triangulation across modes and deliberative validation through the three-tier committee sequence. This methodology delineates a clear audit trail from stakeholder voice to policy choice and provides sufficient analytic granularity (by service cluster and scheme) to support credible inferences regarding priorities and trade-offs. The next section presents the thematic findings from the portal and related engagements and examines how SSPA initiatives address challenges to governance and bureaucratic integrity.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes SSPA reform from two complementary vantage points: first, the demand-side signals articulated by public servants via the SSPA Portal, and second, the supply side design of SSPA initiatives intended to operationalize those signals. Consistent with the methodological protocol, portal submissions were classified within three predefined domains—organizational development, remuneration sustainability, and talent development—and compared across service clusters to identify convergences, divergences, and cross-cutting priorities.

The discussion foregrounds the talent development domain, where the thematic analysis identified a coherent agenda centered on capability building, credible performance recognition, opening channels for modernizing entry, and system hygiene (mobility/portability, discipline, and exit). While proposals on career advancement and pathway design were among the most salient, detailed treatment of promotion mechanisms falls outside the scope of this paper's focus on governance and bureaucratic integrity.

Interpreting these findings through an integrity-and-governance lens, the remainder of the section examines how specific SSPA components translate expressed needs into institutional design: the civil service pension reform and its implications for fiscal transparency and rule clarity; the Public Service Value Cultivation initiative as a vehicle for embedding shared ethical norms and supervisory accountability; the Public Service Talent Development Policy, which links competency frameworks to development, placement, and succession; the strengthened regime for managing low-performing officers, which streamlines timelines and clarifies decision rights while preserving due process; and the upgraded appraisal and recognition system, which ties rewards to verified contributions with safeguards against subjectivity.

Across these strands, the analytic touchstones are neutrality, accountability, professionalism, and procedural fairness, together with the governance levers of transparency, oversight capacity, and fiscal sustainability.

Thematic Analysis of the SSPA Portal

As stipulated in the SSPA Portal: Data and Analysis subsection, proposals were subsequently categorised within the portal's three domains (organisational development, remuneration sustainability, and talent development), with recurring issues in each domain organised into thematic categories, compared across clusters to identify similarities and differences, and ultimately consolidated to offer a comprehensive overview of reform priorities. This study particularly examines proposals for talent development.

An analysis of the talent development domain yielded a coherent set of reform priorities centered on progression clarity, capability building, credible performance recognition, and improvements in managing low performers. The most salient codes concerned career structure—proposals to improve career advancement in public service and establish inclusive, holistic pathways that recognize both specialties and leadership tracks. The second theme addressed the capacity development of civil servants, including training policy improvements aligned to role requirements, performance-based recognition tied to verified outcomes, and appraisal reform to reduce subjectivity through clearer criteria, evidence requirements, and calibration. The third theme focused on opening channels and modernizing entries, including a feasibility study for special appointment routes among higher service groups and amendments to appointment methods (e.g., permanent or contractual) to reflect contemporary workforce requirements.

Finally, a set of proposals aimed at systemizing the whole ecosystem of managing the best talent in the public service: policies for portability and mobility to facilitate lateral movement and skills recognition;

enhancements to disciplinary policies and procedures for timely and consistent enforcement; and adjustments to the exit policy to ensure due process in addressing persistent underperformance. While SSPA does cater to career advancement, and several methods have been proposed, this paper deliberately focuses on capability building, value cultivation, performance recognition, opening channels, modernising entry, and system hygiene reforms (mobility/portability, discipline, and exit)—to examine their implications for governance and bureaucratic integrity.

SSPA Initiatives to Improve Governance and Bureaucratic Integrity

Pension Reform

The existing pension scheme implemented in Malaysia is based on the defined benefit (DB) method, which means that the retirement benefits of officers are fully funded by the Government. The calculation of this retirement benefit is based on primary legislation, subsidiary legislation, and relevant circulars. Seeing the impact of the increased government liability on pension payments covering civil service retirees, Members, Members of the Administration, and Members of the Parliament appointed under Members of Parliament (Remuneration) Act 1980 [Act 237], political secretaries, and judges, the government feels the need to reform the civil service pension scheme from DB to defined contribution (DC).

Under the SSPA, the decision to transform the civil-service pension into a DC rather than a DB design can reinforce the government's effort to govern public service and maintain bureaucratic integrity in several mutually reinforcing ways. First, DC enhances fiscal transparency, predictability, and intergenerational equity by repairing obligations at a rule-based contribution rate (Barr and Diamond, 2008; Asher and Bali, 2015). Second, as the benefits are calculated based on contribution and net investment returns based on codified regulations, DC limits discretion and eliminates incentives toward end-of-career salary engineering or pension-spiking, which promotes HR decisions made on a merit basis and perceived fairness (Palacios and Whitehouse, 2006).

Third, professionalizing oversight through explicit fiduciary governance, such as trustee boards, investment policy statements, audited reporting, and disclosure of fees, is more characteristic of DC schemes and entrenches accountability and ethical protection (Clark and Urwin 2008; Ambachtsheer, Capelle, and Lum 2008). Lastly, personal accounts, periodic statements, and low-fee lifecycle default options improve disclosure and audit trails that increase people's trust in fair benefits administration (Mitchell and Utkus, 2004). By balancing transition procedures and ensuring strong protection for its members, the DB-to-DC transformation makes the SSPA consistent with the principles of neutrality, professionalism, and fairness and depoliticises one of the fundamental aspects of the employment relationship.

Value Cultivation

The Public Service Value Cultivation Initiative ensures that the services delivered are based on rules, procedures, and work ethics in the public service management and administration system to ensure the smooth delivery of services uniformly to all stakeholders. Compliance with the rules, procedures, and ethics of this system indirectly shapes civil servants, who carry out their duties and responsibilities by practicing the core values of public service (trustworthy, truthful, wise, fair, transparent, and grateful).

A culture of solid value practice will be translated by civil servants who take responsibility for aligning their values and goals with the core values of the public service set, namely trustworthy, truthful, wise, fair, transparent, and grateful. The processing of values carried out based on ethics and rules to

achieve the vision and mission is a positive reflection of the commitment and integrity of civil servants for the benefit of public service.

The initiatives outline three strategies: the first is to strengthen civil servant values. These practices will ensure that civil servants take responsibility for translating each task and responsibility as promised with full commitment and integrity. This strategy aims to foster and encourage learning and urge positive work behavior as a responsibility entrusted to the sustainability of public service.

The second strategy is “leadership role empowerment.”. The strategy emphasizes leadership, especially for leaders and supervisors at various levels of management, so that the public service system is implemented according to regulations. This empowerment is done by preparing officers to carry out effective supervisory roles through monitoring and enforcement activities.

Lastly, the organizational governance strengthening strategy focuses on the effectiveness of the implementation of established systems, procedures, and regulations in facilitating the implementation of actions that benefit stakeholders as a whole. This strengthened effort involves determining and improving existing actions, reporting, and enforcement.

With integrity and governance standards being widely accepted, the Public Service Value Cultivation Initiative of the SSPA fits into the levers to mitigate corruption risks and create a trustful administration. The institutionalization of civil servant values creates a shared vocabulary focused on ethics and duty orientation. This is what integrity theorists term ‘the instilling of values, norms, and rules that govern behavior, thus enhancing neutrality, professionalism, and accountability in decision-making’ (Huberts, 2014; Menzel, 2017). The operationalisation of leadership roles empowers those in charge to set the tone and supervise, coach, and impose standards to enhance rule consistency and reduce the risk of discretion-driven integrity, which can also be seen in comparative data on the relationship between professional management and cleaner, more competent bureaucracies (Menzel, 2017; Dahlstrom and Lapuente, 2017).

Lastly, the reinforcement of organisational governance involves tightening systems, procedures, reporting, and enforcement to comply with the OECD Public Integrity Framework, which prioritises coherent controls, transparency, and accountability mechanisms as sources of trust and quality in services (OECD, 2017; 2020; 2023). Collectively, the three strategies support each other in developing a culture of integrity (values), credible oversight (leadership), and strong controls (organization)—the main design of good governance in the public sector.

Public Service Talent Development Policy

This Public Service Talent Development Policy was introduced to achieve the following objectives: (i) develop competent and high-performing officers in line with the current and future strategic needs of the public service; (ii) strengthen the role of heads of service and heads of departments in developing talent, improving officer competence and strengthening organisational capabilities; (iii) provide a progressive career development direction; (iv) strengthen the potential assessment mechanism and implementation of succession plans; and (v) strengthen the culture of values and ethics in talent development.

Every officer must equip himself with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and behaviors through a planned talent development programme. The application and inculcation of values act as a complement and driver for performance achievement in line with the core values of public service, namely, trustworthiness, truth, wisdom, fairness, transparency, and gratitude.

In addition, planning for officer talent development is streamlined with a clearer governance approach and an action plan. This improvement is to support the implementation of the SSPA towards

the effectiveness and achievement of results in service delivery to the people. The civil service framework for talent development consists of performance assessment, competency development, and potential development.

Talent development is essential for maintaining high public service performance, enhancing efficiency, and ensuring leadership continuity. A comprehensive performance-based talent development framework can shape officer competencies to align with the demands of their respective positions. Subsequently, potential officers can be identified and developed to expand their knowledge and skills further. Talent development can also increase the competitiveness of the organization and ensure that public service is always ready to face future challenges and meet the dynamics of stakeholder expectations.

An effective talent development policy enhances an organization's governance and bureaucratic integrity by inculcating merit, capability, and accountability in the people-management cycle. Performance-based progression and competency-based development help clarify role expectations and decrease the space of discretion, which is the case with less corruption and more equitable HR practices, according to comparative studies (Dahlstrom, Lapuente, and Teorell, 2012; Evans and Rauch, 1999; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster, 2018).

The main characteristics of integrity systems, which include tone at the top and supervision in the middle, are operationalised through leadership empowerment and the responsibility of supervisors for coaching, monitoring, and ensuring ethical conduct (Menzel, 2017; OECD, 2017, 2020). Possible assessment and succession planning can improve continuity and minimize the risks of politicization by ensuring that advancement opportunities are transparent and based on criteria, as the OECD recommends for public service leadership and capability (OECD, 2019).

Integrating values and ethics into development programmes makes skill building compatible with the requirements of the field, including the neutrality, professionalism, and fairness of the public sector, whereas performance information establishes feedback loops, enhancing the quality of services and stewardship (Moynihan, 2008; OECD, 2023). Combined, these components of competency frameworks, performance and potential assessments, leadership accountability, and value cultivation are complementary controls that raise good governance and bureaucratic integrity.

Managing Low-Performing Officers

This reform stream strengthens the management of persistent underperformance by updating disciplinary policies and procedures—including a clearer, faster exit policy—while preserving due process, proportionality, and managerial accountability.

Under the Civil Servants (Conduct and Discipline) Regulations 1993 [P.U.A. 395/1993], disciplinary provisions currently cover matters such as absence without leave, criminal proceedings, procedures and punishments, detention, and suspension. The proposed reform updates this framework by streamlining timelines and clarifying decision rights—empowering Heads of Departments to act on documented underperformance—while preserving due process and proportionality. Complementing these changes, the Exit Policy is simplified and accelerated, with the implementation window for persistent low performance reduced from three years to one year and seven months, thereby providing a clearer and faster pathway to resolution consistent with managerial accountability.

Reforming disciplinary and exit policies can directly strengthen governance and bureaucratic integrity by tightening the link between rules, performance, and consequences while preserving due

process. Shorter, clearer disciplinary timelines increase the timeliness, predictability, and credibility of enforcement—key attributes of effective integrity systems (OECD, 2017, 2020). Empowering heads of departments clarifies line accountability for supervision and standards, reducing ambiguity and helping managers address misconduct and underperformance early, provided decisions are documented against objective criteria (OECD, 2019; Menzel, 2017).

The streamlined exit pathway for persistently low-performing officers (from three years to one year and seven months) signals performance seriousness and protects service quality and equity for both high-performing staff and citizens (Moynihan, 2008; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2015). Simultaneously, integrity requires procedural justice—transparent rules, proportional sanctions, the right to representation/appeal, and consistent application across units—to sustain internal legitimacy and guard against politicization or bias (Tyler, 2006; Menzel, 2017).

Taken together, these changes can reduce discretionary drift, enhance managerial responsibility, and reinforce a culture in which neutrality, professionalism, and fairness are not only espoused but also enforced through reliable, fair, and swift administrative processes.

Improving performance: Appraisal and Recognition

The existing performance appraisal system, which has been in place since 2002, is effective. However, the Civil Service still faces ongoing challenges that justify strengthening the current performance appraisal methods. One of the challenges faced in the appraisal process is subjectivity. There is a perception that the existing appraisal method is both subjective and inconsistent.

A new performance assessment method, which includes elements of competence and values, has been developed in accordance with the government's goals and strategies to strengthen talent management in public service and increase national productivity. To strengthen the talent of public service officers, competency development and performance, as

well as potential assessments, must be used as a basis to ensure that the quality of public service delivery is always relevant and that individual and organisational performance increases. In addition to producing holistic civil servants in various aspects—performance, spirituality, and personality—the practice of values must also be emphasized in line with the excellence that is highlighted to ensure the sustainability of public service.

The competency model serves as the foundation for developing new performance assessment methods and identifying potential. In addition, this competency model also guides and considers the criteria for acting and promotions, as well as the organization of training and development for officers in line with their career progression.

The main focus of the establishment of the competency model is to encompass generic competencies (including elements of value and leadership development) in the public service as well as functional competencies based on the service scheme and position held. This policy is expected to ensure officer development, promotion, career paths, and advancement, as well as placement of officers who are suitable for the competence and requirements of a position (the right person for the right post).

The performance-based reward principle was introduced to increase the productivity of public service by encouraging potential officers to continue to improve their respective capabilities and competencies and be rewarded commensurate with their efforts.

The appraisal and recognition system, which is competency-oriented and values-based, enhances governance and bureaucratic integrity because it makes people's decisions more rule-based, transparent, and defensible. Clear competency models (generic and functional) minimize the subjectivity of raters by basing them on visible and role-relevant behaviors, enhancing the consistency of promotions, postings, and development planning (Campion et al., 2011; DeNisi and Murphy, 2017). When appraisal processes instill the values of public service (neutrality, professionalism, and fairness) and have procedural-justice protections (transparent criteria, right to feedback, and structured appeals), integrity is strengthened, and they are empirically associated with legitimacy and compliance (Colquitt et al., 2001; Huberts, 2014).

Rater training and calibration/moderation meetings are additional managerial practices that prevent biases and grade inflation and leave auditable trails that promote departmental accountability (Woehr and Huffcutt, 1994; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan, 2015).

Lastly, basing recognition on proven contribution and competence, not seniority, is consistent with international recommendations on performance-based, competence-driven public services and may enhance performance without undermining fairness when clearly defined and supervised (OECD, 2019; Perry, Engbers, and Jun, 2009; Hasnain, Manning, and Pierskalla, 2012).

Taken together, the portal evidence and SSPA design choices converge on a reinforcing integrity-governance architecture. On the demand side, public servants emphasise clearer signals and fairer systems—competency-anchored development, calibrated appraisals and

recognition, modernised entry routes, and cleaner enabling rules for mobility, discipline, and exit. On the supply side, the SSPA responds with rule-based pension entitlements that enhance budget predictability, value-cultivation measures that institutionalize ethical conduct and supervisory responsibility, talent-development policies that align capability with role requirements, and performance systems that connect recognition to demonstrable outcomes within procedurally just processes.

The cumulative effect is to strengthen the coupling between rules, performance, and consequences while protecting due process—conditions that sustain neutrality, professionalism, and public trust. Residual risks—transition equity in pension reform, capacity for fair and consistent supervision, and calibration quality in appraisal—are tractable through phased implementation, rater training and moderation, transparent appeals, and routine audit and disclosure.

Overall, the analysis indicates that the SSPA's talent and integrity measures provide a credible pathway to a more transparent, predictable, and merit-based public administration capable of delivering improved service outcomes under conditions of political and fiscal constraints.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

This study explored how the public administration of Malaysia in contemporary times is being transformed by three mutually reinforcing dynamics: the deepening of populism, the accumulation of cascading shocks, sometimes referred to as a polycrisis', and the rapid diffusion of general-purpose technologies, particularly AI. Together, these dynamics compel

governments to secure legitimacy, performance, and integrity under conditions of turbulence and technological change (e.g., 4IR's reconfiguration of service delivery and pandemic-era stress tests on the capacity of states). This environment places public administration in a critical position, necessitating adaptation without compromising the fundamental bureaucratic values of neutrality and due process.

In Malaysia, these global pressures intersect with a sequenced national agenda that couples economic strategy with administrative renewal. The Madani Economy (27 July 2023) defines an inclusive, values-based growth framework; the RMK-12 Mid-Term Review (September 2023) speeds up the improvement of governance and the delivery of services; and two reform pillars—SSPA (effective 1 December 2024) and ARPA (to be announced early 2025)—restructuring remuneration and performance systems and providing strategic direction for a citizen-centered, integrity-focused administration. In parallel, Malaysia has established a normative and institutional foundation for AI governance (NAI Roadmap 2021-2025; AIGE 2024; NAIIO; Public Sector AI Adaptation Guidelines 2025) to capture productivity gains while ensuring neutrality and due process.

Against this backdrop, Malaysian public administrators are in a position to establish discipline by translating such national directions into institutional designs that would tighten the coupling between rules, performance, and consequences while safeguarding procedural justice. Concretely, this means ensuring consistency between capability building and explicit competency frameworks, ensuring calibration between appraisal and recognition processes and verifiable outcomes, modernising the entry and mobility to allow more agile capabilities deployment, and ensuring clarity of the disciplinary and exit processes to ensure fairness and timeliness. These are precisely the integrity and governance levers that emerged in the demand-side signals of the portal and were operationalized in the supply side instruments of the SSPA/ARPA.

This positioning is consistent with the theoretical framework of this study. Public Value Theory (PVT) helps clarify what a value reform should establish and sustain (accountability, professionalism, fairness); Institutional Resilience Theory (IRT) explains how institutions are held together and are flexible under conditions of turbulence; and mission-oriented governance provides an operational logic for infusing societal values into policy instruments and investments. Read together, the Madani/RMK-12 realignment and the SSPA/ARPA package are examples of how Malaysia is putting these logics into practice.

Within Malaysia's reform package, the talent-development stream of the SSPA is very much in line with the measures that comparative scholarship recommends governments take to keep up with the pressures of today: political volatility, compounding shocks, and technological disruption. By anchoring development, appraisal, and recognition in explicit competency frameworks, coupled with the introduction of calibration and rater-training safeguards, the reforms mean less subjectivity, more reliable signalling, and people's decisions that can be audited—outcomes that have consistently been linked to improved performance and fairer HR practices (Campion et al., 2011; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2015; OECD, 2019). The focus on value cultivation and empowered supervisory leadership turns ethical commitments into the supervision of day-to-day activities, reinforcing “tone at the top” and “supervision in the middle,” which integrity scholars associate with cleaner and more capable bureaucracies (Huberts, 2014; Menzel, 2017; OECD, 2017, 2020).

Efforts to open channels and modernize entry/mobility via more transparent and criteria-based routes and portability are in line with what evidence indicates as systematically lowering corruption risks and enhancing state capacity (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Dahlstrom, Lapuente, & Teorell, 2012). Finally, sharper, swifter, but less procedural, just disciplinary, and exit pathways draw closer the coupling between rules, performance, and consequences and protect legitimacy, as demonstrated in the literature on procedural justice and compliance (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Tyler, 2006).

Table 2: SSPA and its Reform Initiatives in Talent Development

National Agenda	Reform Initiatives
SSPA	• Pension Reform • Value Cultivation • Public Service Talent Development Policy • Managing Low-Performing Officers • Improving performance: Appraisal and Recognition

Table 2 summarizes the SSPA and its reform initiatives in talent development to address challenges in governance and bureaucratic integrity. Taken together, these measures promote the fundamental governance goals of neutrality, professionalism, transparency, and public trust—exactly the institutional posture suggested for administrations facing populist contestations, polycrisis dynamics, and rapid technological change.

Moving into Phase 2, RMK-13, Chapter 4 (*Mempercepat Pelaksanaan Agenda Reformasi Perkhidmatan Awam*) explicitly aligns the SSPA Reform ecosystem for future-ready talent. In practice, this means institutionalising an integrated competency architecture (generic, leadership, and functional) linked to mission outcomes; deploying workforce planning that connects recruitment, mobility/portability, and succession to priority capabilities; professionalising supervisory accountability (rater training, calibration, and moderated panels) to protect procedural justice; and scaling continuous learning with AI/data literacy, model assurance know-how, and evidence-use skills across cadres. These moves dovetail with RMK-13's focus on accelerating public service reform, strengthening governance and public sector talent capacity, and removing regulatory frictions to enable performance – the policy anchor for Phase 2's talent investments.

Measurement should also be enhanced by implementing transparent and regular reporting (e.g., calibration dispersion, mobility rates, time-to-decision in discipline/appeals, training-to-deployment match) as part of the plan's reinforced monitoring arrangements to establish effective learning loops. Taken together, this ecosystem approach transforms SSPA's people-system instruments into a sustainable platform of capability that promotes neutrality, professionalism, and quality service in accordance with RMK-13's reform agenda.

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