



# Papua New Guinea's 2022 General Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The upcoming Papua New Guinea (PNG) national general elections, scheduled to run from April through July 2022, are worrying, due to concerns not only about the health of Papua New Guineans but also the health of PNG's democracy. In PNG, elections — held every five years — are one of the only occasions when citizens actively engage with the state on a nationwide scale. It is a period of high activity and mobility. In the midst of the pandemic, there are certain election-time behaviours that make them likely superspreader events. Drawing from the experiences of two recent by-elections in Goroka and Port Moresby North West, this In Brief examines some of the risks and implications associated with conducting elections during the time of COVID-19 as well as some of the negative aspects of PNG elections that might reoccur in 2022.

PNG, as with the rest of the world, has grappled with the disastrous effects of COVID-19. While PNG was fortunate to miss the first wave of the pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 by quickly shutting its international borders, in July 2020, a curfew was announced, and a state of emergency was called. Of more concern is the potential impact of the pandemic on the country's 'already fragile health care system' (Wiltshire et al. 2021:xi), which struggles to deal effectively with the everyday health needs of Papua New Guineans, let alone those that might arise during a pandemic. Moreover, misinformation from social media and a lack of substantial, integrated awareness of the pandemic in local communities has contributed to widespread vaccine hesitancy. More recently, after many people travelling and not adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols during the Christmas and New Year period, there has been a surge of infections of the new Omicron variant. This is PNG's fourth wave.

## Risky election-time behaviours

The first risky election-time behaviour is during nominations, when it is a common practice for supporters to congregate and escort their candidate to nominate either in walking convoys or convoys of overcrowded vehicles usually accompanied by dancing,

chanting and singing. Another risky election-time behaviour is that of supporters gathering in campaign houses, an activity that was once thought to be concentrated in the Highlands but is now practiced in various degrees throughout the country (Haley and Zubrinich 2018:44). Then, there are the public rallies in which congregations from various communities assemble to listen to candidates make their speeches. Will there be any government restrictions on mobility and crowd control? Thus far, the government of PNG and the media have been relatively quiet on this aspect of election preparations.

During the Port Moresby North West by-election in June 2021, a range of information, education and communication materials were prepared and distributed by the PNG Electoral Commission (PNGEC), specifically, posters with COVID-19 risk measures pertaining to the polling exercise. These posters had the following announcements:

- Public gatherings such as campaign rallies may be conducted in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines.
- If you need help to vote, you can bring a family member or ask the presiding officer to assist you. You and your assistant should wear facemasks and stand two steps away from each other.
- No mass gathering will be allowed when the winner is declared.
- Bring your own blue biro to mark your ballot papers for health and hygiene.
- Voters must wear a mask.
- Stand two big steps apart.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Wash or sanitise hands when entering and leaving polling booth.
- Avoid touching doors, tables or ballot boxes.
- Avoid sharing biros.
- COVID-19 protocols must be followed.

These guidelines were derived from the Niupela Pasin booklet, a joint publication of the World Health Organisation and PNG's Department of Health released in August 2020. It is PNG's version of measures for the 'new normal' during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were



put on social media and announced over the Motuan radio as the PNGEC prepared a COVID-19 standard operating procedure for their staff. However, these posters were not as visible as the candidate posters and therefore not as easily accessible for voters.

The Moresby North West by-election was postponed once due to COVID-19, with the PNGEC acknowledging the risks of local transmission and urging voters to observe the Niupela Pasin COVID-19 measures. Due to the small scale of the Port Moresby North West urban by-election, the concentrated efforts of the PNGEC staff and the relative newness of the pandemic at that stage, the Niupela Pasin instructions were followed to a certain extent, even without the visible presence of security or law enforcement officers to ensure adherence to the advice in the confines of the polling area. Yet when the results were declared, throngs of people gathered to celebrate without taking precautionary action. It was also observed by locals during the Goroka by-election in October 2020 that COVID-19 protocols and Niupela Pasin-recommended behaviours were not adhered to, nor were they enforced. The failure of Eastern Highlanders to quickly adopt the Niupela Pasin and refrain from public gatherings resulted in a devastating outbreak of the Delta variant the following year (2021). With such lax attitudes shown by people during the height of the pandemic, it is unlikely that COVID-19 measures, or even the Niupela Pasin recommendations, will be followed at this year's general election, given the lessening of restrictions. While most voters will comply and be orderly in the polling booth, it is their socialising during and after the election period that is worrying.

### Different election, same story

If previous elections are an indication of what to expect, the 2022 PNG national elections will be characterised by names missing from the electoral roll as well as electoral misconduct, such as voter impersonation, underage voting, voter intimidation, block and proxy voting. The 2017 national elections were accompanied by considerable violence that resulted in an estimated 204 election-related deaths, even with over 10,500 security personnel mobilised, the largest number deployed in PNG's election history (Haley and Zubrinich 2018:39).

For the first time, security cameras were installed at the Goroka by-elections in October 2020 to monitor polling. While there were still reports of violence and vote rigging on social media, then police minister Bryan Kramer maintained that it was a valuable exercise, as all the ballot boxes were accounted for, individuals who caused disruptions at certain polling sites were recorded on tape and much insight was gained on the ongoing security challenges for elections, particularly in the Highlands. To date, there have been no reports from the police minister or the PNGEC about using camera surveillance in the coming elections.

Another familiar feature of PNG elections since independence is the presence of numerous domestic, regional and international election observation groups. In 2017, PNG saw election observation teams from Australia (ANU), the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the European Union and Transparency International PNG. However, even now, with travel restrictions slowly easing in other countries, PNG's low vaccination rates and minimal adherence to COVID-19 measures make PNG a high-risk travel destination. Hence, fewer international observers are expected for the 2022 elections. While having international election observers has not eliminated election malfeasance in the past, it has acted as a deterrent. In 2022, limited observation — or, for many polling stations, zero observation — in some electorates may result in brazen acts of misconduct that in previous elections have been more discreet.

Despite efforts by the PNG government and other agencies to combat the spread of the virus, including the roll out of the Niupela Pasin and the appeal for citizens to get vaccinated, most Papua New Guineans appear to be carrying on without acknowledging the threat of COVID-19. Next month, when candidates go to nominate and, later, when voters go to the polls, voter behaviour will likely mirror that seen in previous elections. However, while the election itself will probably be like others before it, including allegations of misconduct, the difference with the 2022 national elections is that they could be a nationwide superspreader event, and with limited international and regional election observation, electoral malfeasance could also spread nationwide.

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### Author notes

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