



PNG's Local-level Government Elections: Causes of the Delays

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Papua New Guinea is due to return to the polls in 2025 — this time for Local-level Government (LLG) elections. Or at least, this is the ambition. Writs for the election were issued on 24 April. This was against the advice of the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission (PNGEC), which requested a delay for a range of operational reasons. Instead of a delay, a very long campaign period was announced, with polling scheduled to begin on 12 July. Serious procurement and organisational issues identified by the PNGEC would have to be addressed after the issue of writs.

This carries risks: all PNG elections are complex, they rarely run smoothly, and LLG elections are in some ways the most complex. There are 6,916 wards in 374 LLGs. Each ward is a separate electoral race, with a total of over 30,000 candidates. In 164 LLGs, the president is elected on the floor of the assembly by the ward members, while in others, there are direct elections and hence different counting procedures and ballot requirements. For 2025, the PNGEC also has to carry out five national by-elections alongside the LLG elections, as well as elections for the 17-member Motu-Koita Assembly (MKA), further complicating preparations.

This constellation of concurrent elections would present a formidable test for any electoral administrator. In the event, issues arose that prevented the election from going ahead as planned. On 4 July, the electoral commissioner, Simon Sinai, announced a postponement to late September for most LLG elections. In some cases, a longer delay was announced and it is now uncertain if elections can be held at all. Meanwhile, the by-elections and election for the MKA are expected to go ahead as planned. What caused these measures?

At its core, the problem is that it has become difficult — and in some cases impossible — to keep track of what villages are within specific wards. Since 2022 there has been a frenzy of modifications to these most basic components of PNG's electoral structure. In the rush to create new LLGs and wards, many incorrectly or obscurely defined wards were approved. This hinders the tasks of creating ward rolls, and therefore also the estimation of how many ballots must be printed for each ward. Extensive changes to LLGs can sometimes also lead to a lack of clarity as to which LLG a ward is a member of. Before ballots can be printed, then, there must be a reconstruction of each ward's history.

With nearly 7,000 wards, this is a daunting task. Yet variations in new LLGs and wards were still being introduced as late as 7 April, less than three weeks before the issue of writs. Provision of the proclamations to the PNGEC did not take place until several weeks later. This created deep uncertainties, as it is not clear which proclamations are legally effective as of the issue of writs, or how the writs relate to a valid set of electoral divisions.

Wards were created in 1998 after the introduction of the 1995 Organic Law on Local-level Governments and Provincial Governments, which established LLGs. LLGs and wards were subsequently modified by ministerial proclamations: the National Executive Council can abolish, establish and vary LLGs on the recommendation of provincial authorities, following a set process that includes several checks. Each proclamation is essentially a list that assigns wards to LLGs, and, in theory, assigns a set of locations to each of the wards. The establishment of new LLGs and wards proceeded slowly after 1997, but in the surge of activity since 2022, proclamations have become less informative. For the most part, only summaries of changes are published in the National Gazette, and these summaries do not include the contents of the ward. However, it has been found that the proclamations themselves also frequently omit this critical information.

There are two conspicuous problems with using wards to establish LLG or national open electorates. The first is that, as lists of place names, they do not specify boundaries and are at best collections of points; although in practice many of the place names refer to locations that do not have well-defined positions. This creates ambiguities and makes splitting wards challenging. The second problem is that there is no definition of what a ward should be. Among other issues, this means there is no upper or lower limit on their population. Many of the wards created since 2020 are extremely small — some with 50 or fewer enrolled voters — while others have over 5,000. PNG has a malapportionment problem in relation to its national electorates (Oppermann et al. forthcoming; Raue 2022). For LLGs, the problem is more severe (Laveil 2025a, 2025b). In the case of individual wards, however, malapportionment is worse still — to the degree that it can be determined.

Working out what is in the list that comprises a ward is not a trivial problem. Splitting a ward is not like drawing a new line on a map. It is more like dividing a genealogical tree that has many adoptions and intermarriages. It requires identifying the complete list of locations in the 'parent' ward and specifying which will go to each 'child'. As wards are transferred between LLGs and sometimes renamed and broken up in the process, multiple LLGs may also have to be considered. Sometimes only new wards are defined in terms of localities, so it is necessary to infer what remains in one ward from what has been taken away from it. It becomes necessary to work through many rounds of proclamations, tracing the genealogy of each ward as it changes names and LLG location, sometimes all the way back to the originals of 1998. But these original proclamations are themselves not readily available.

The somewhat dismal process outlined above is not the worst-case scenario. Some of the recent proclamations are incomplete or ambiguous, and as a consequence it is impossible to work out what is in a ward's list of locations, no matter how carefully the genealogy is reconstructed. In these cases, a roll cannot be compiled.

The net result of this is that the PNGEC was presented with an immensely difficult and in some instances impossible task immediately before the election. As the full scope of the problem was appreciated, it became apparent that a delay was inevitable. The DPA has obtained a partial set of proclamations made since 2020 and a preliminary analysis of these suggests it will require intense effort to meet the new deadline, as about eight weeks are required after the problem is solved to print election materials. However, where proclamations are incorrectly specified, and there are many such cases, there is no obvious way to solve the problem. Wards cannot be altered during elections after the issue of writs, and there appears to be little that can be done except to cancel elections in these areas.

In the past, attention has been drawn to shortcomings of the PNGEC, but in this case it appears to have done the right thing: the delay is well warranted. As this problem has been known for some time, it is perhaps concerning that the decision has been taken so late, but postponing and possibly cancelling elections is an extremely difficult decision for any administrator or politician to take. Not acting, however, would have had serious consequences not only for this year's election,

but also, by worsening the already-deep ambiguity of PNG's administrative geography (Haley and Oppermann 2024), for the 2027 National General Election. Wards serve as the basis for the compilation of electoral rolls — perhaps the most notorious point of failure in PNG elections. The obscurity that increasingly shrouds the foundations of PNG's elections could facilitate manipulation of enrolments, and may yet prove to have further political consequences.

Author notes

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