

# Uncertainty surrounds PNG's local government elections

by Kingtau Mambon and Maholopa Laveil

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Voters queue to vote in PNG's 2017 elections  
*Photo Credit: Flickr/Commonwealth Secretariat*

In August 2024, Papua New Guinea will conduct **local level government (LLG) elections**. The government has announced that voters will elect LLG presidents directly. Only once before, in 2013, have LLG presidents previously been elected directly. Usually, presidents are elected by ward councillors, who are elected by voters. LLGs are crucial in providing government services such as water supply, roads and health services jointly with the provinces, but are little studied.

LLGs were introduced as PNG's third tier of government in 1995 when the **Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Governments** was passed — with provinces being the second tier. LLGs are further subdivided into “wards” or local-government electorates. Subnational governments, including LLGs, are overseen at the national level by the Department of Provincial and Local-level Government Affairs. LLGs are required by law to **receive 15%** of the province function grant (national government transfers) and, in practice, **LLG elections** have been held roughly mid-way through the national election cycle.

The precise number of LLGs is not known. This complicates policy planning and service delivery on the part of important government departments such as the Department of National Planning and Monitoring, the Department of Health, and provincial governments. The number of LLGs reported by different agencies varies. As the table below shows, the number of LLGs reported varies between 296 and 396. The national government has **the authority** to create new LLGs, acting on the advice of the provinces and the Electoral Boundaries Commission (EBC). Assessing the number of LLGs is further complicated by the recent creation of new LLGs.

**Table 1: Reported number of LLGs by source**

| Agencies  | Number of LLGs | Year |
|---|----------------|------|
| Auditor General                                     | 321            | 2022 |
| National Statistical Office                         | 331            | 2021 |
| Electoral Boundary Commission                       | 333            | 2021 |
| Commonwealth Local Government Forum                 | 296            | 2020 |
| International Foundation for Electoral System       | 331            | 2019 |
| Wikipedia   | 326            | 2018 |
| Humanitarian Data Index                             | 326            | 2019 |
| Department of Provincial and Local Level Government | 331            | 2021 |
| The National  | 396            | 2023 |
| PNG Electoral Commission                            | 329            | 2019 |
| Department of Treasury and NEFC                     | 349            | 2024 |

Created with Datawrapper

Source: Auditor General, National Statistical Office, Electoral Boundary Commission, Commonwealth Local Government Forum, International Foundation for Electoral System, Wikipedia, Humanitarian Data Index, Department of Provincial and Local Level Government, The National, PNG Electoral Commission, Department of Treasury and National Economic and Fiscal Commission.

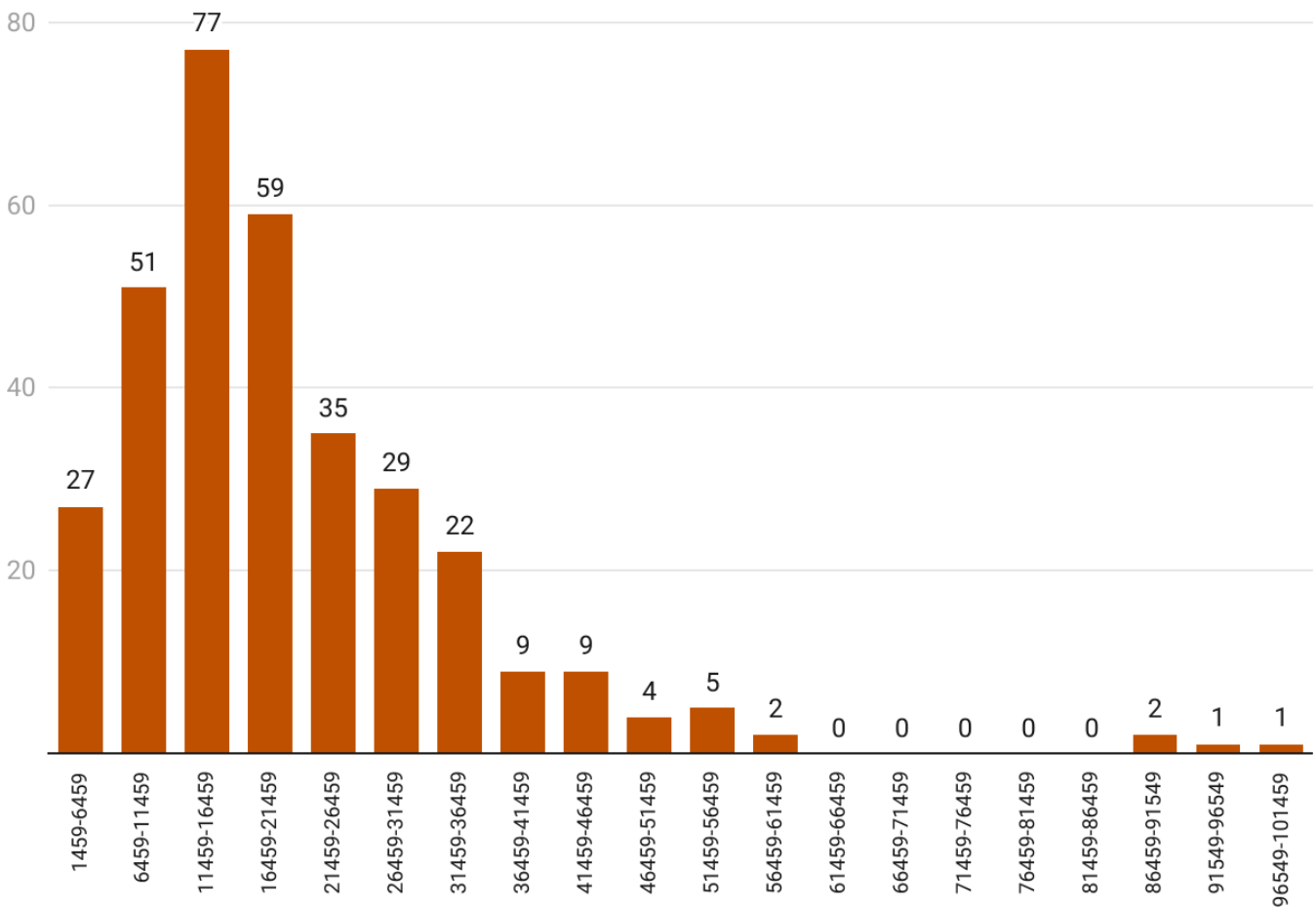
Earlier this year, the **National Economic and Fiscal Commission** published a list of LLGs to which it allocated function grants in 2023 — listing 349 of them. This list, however, did not include **Bougainville’s 12 LLGs** or the 2 new LLGs in the Hela and Oro provinces that were created by the EBC in 2022. Moreover, **three new LLGs** were created in Madang and **five new LLGs** in East New Britain following LLG grant appropriations in 2023. We have counted 370 LLGs (see [our list here](#), which will also be added to Devpolicy’s **PNG Elections database**), although we are not completely certain this figure is accurate.

The new LLGs in Madang and East New Britain are interesting. Both provinces cited

high population growth, the need for improved access to government services and better management of funds as reasons for splitting large LLGs and creating new ones. These provincial governments have noted, however, that the new LLGs will pose an administrative challenge for the districts of which they form part.

The EBC attempted, in 2022, to reduce malapportionment in districts on the basis of the 2011 census. Although the EBC did not publish a complete list of LLGs and the 2011 census was not well run, the EBC’s report still gives a sense of the severity of malapportionment among LLGs. According to the EBC, the largest LLG was Anglimp in Jiwaka province with 100,301 people. Anglimp was 69 times larger than the smallest LLG – Aua Wuvulu of Manus province with only 1,459 people.

**Figure 1: LLG distribution by population size (2011 census)**



Source: Electoral Boundaries Commission report 2021 • Created with Datawrapper

While uncertainty about the number of LLGs, and their size variance, will likely pose problems for the LLG elections, the government’s own preparations also appear inadequate. K85 million has been allocated for the LLG elections in this year’s budget, which is far lower than the K230 million initially requested by the PNG Electoral Commission (PNGEC). Under-resourcing of the 2019 LLG elections by the

national government left provinces having to pick up a large share of the tab for running the elections.

Another concern is that the LLG elections will be using an inaccurate roll of registered voters. **The LLG roll** typically used by the PNGEC is an updated version of the roll used in the national elections. Although little is known about the status of the LLG roll, the roll used in the 2022 national elections was **severely inaccurate** and **problematic** in many places. The PNGEC **failed to update** the roll properly in 2022, disenfranchising many voters and enabling others to vote more than once.

Although preparations for this year's LLG elections **appear slow**, the risk of violence is lower than it is in national elections because the stakes are lower — LLGs control a lot less funding than national members of parliament do. Previous LLG elections were conducted largely **without incident**, relative to the violence, destruction of property, and high number of deaths in the **2017** and **2022** national elections. Notwithstanding the success of the **2019 LLG elections**, the risk of violence remains high in provinces such as Enga where **tribal fighting** is ongoing.

In summary, the actual number of LLGs appears to be a matter of dispute, and more needs to be done to reduce the variation in LLG size. Under-resourcing of the PNGEC and an inaccurate roll will likely affect this year's LLG elections, though financial contributions from provincial administrations should help circumvent resourcing issues. Finally, conducting the LLG elections is likely to be challenging in places known for tribal fighting and violence.

### **Disclosures:**

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/uncertainty-surrounding-pngs-local-government-elections-20240311/>