

Where is Mendi? How PNG's electoral map broke: part 1

by Thiago Cintra Oppermann

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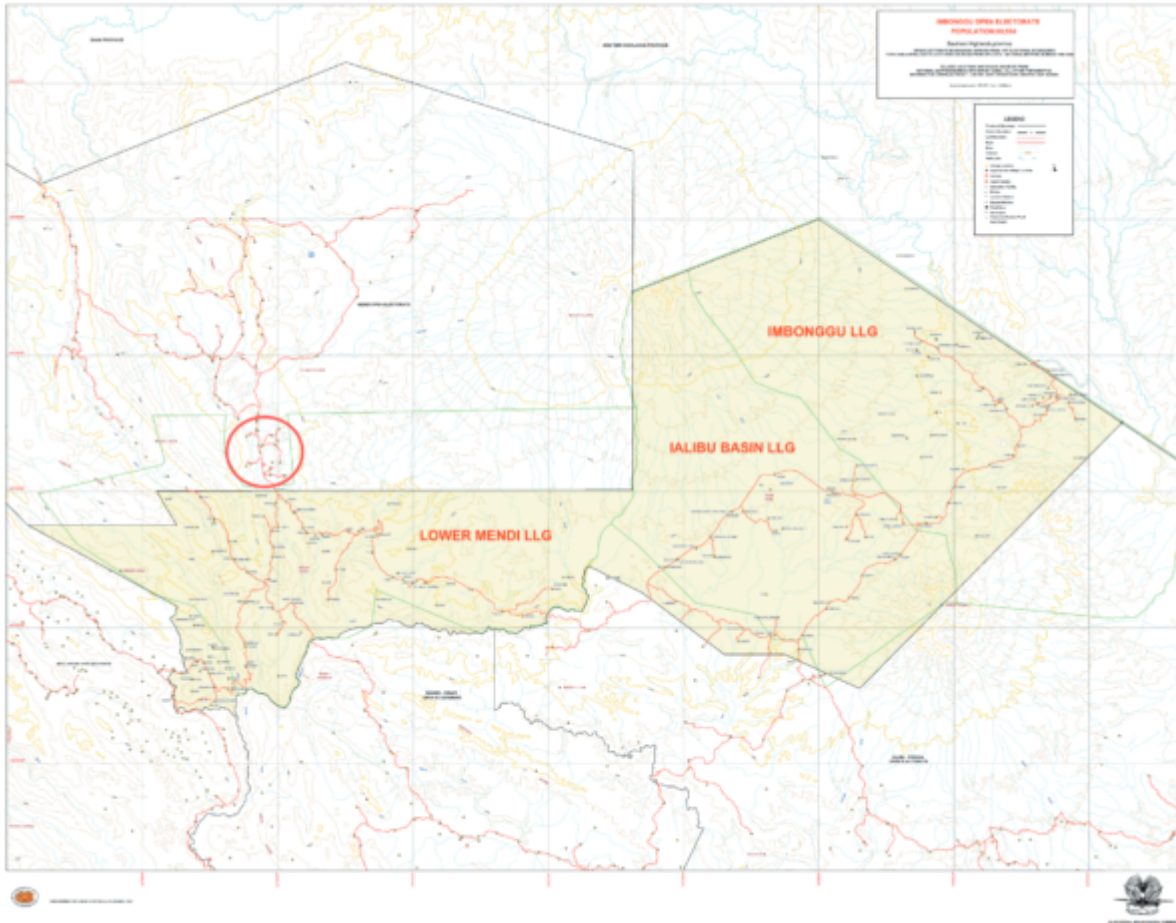
Inset of Mendi-Munihu electorate map
*Photo Credit: PNG Electoral Boundaries
Commission*

Most people in Papua New Guinea know where Mendi is. The city, nestled amongst the mountains of the Southern Highlands, has a permanent population of around 30,000 which ebbs and flows as people visit the regional centre to carry out business. It would be surprising if someone drew a map of the Highlands and forgot to include the Southern Highlands or its capital. Many people, particularly if they are interested in elections, or paid attention at geography classes, will answer that Mendi is situated in the electorate of Mendi-Munihu Open. This is certainly what I would have answered.

Surprisingly, this answer is *not* correct. Mendi is not in the electorate of Mendi-Munihu. It *used* to be there, but not anymore. The town has not moved, but the boundaries of Mendi-Munihu have. This took place in 2022, when a new set of electorate maps were approved by Parliament. There is no shame in not knowing this, as the change to Mendi was not publicised. Indeed, the inhabitants of Mendi — who would go on to cast votes for Mendi-Munihu Open candidates in 2022, after the town had been removed from that electorate — might be even more surprised. So what is the real answer?

Figure 1: Imbonggu Open electorate Map

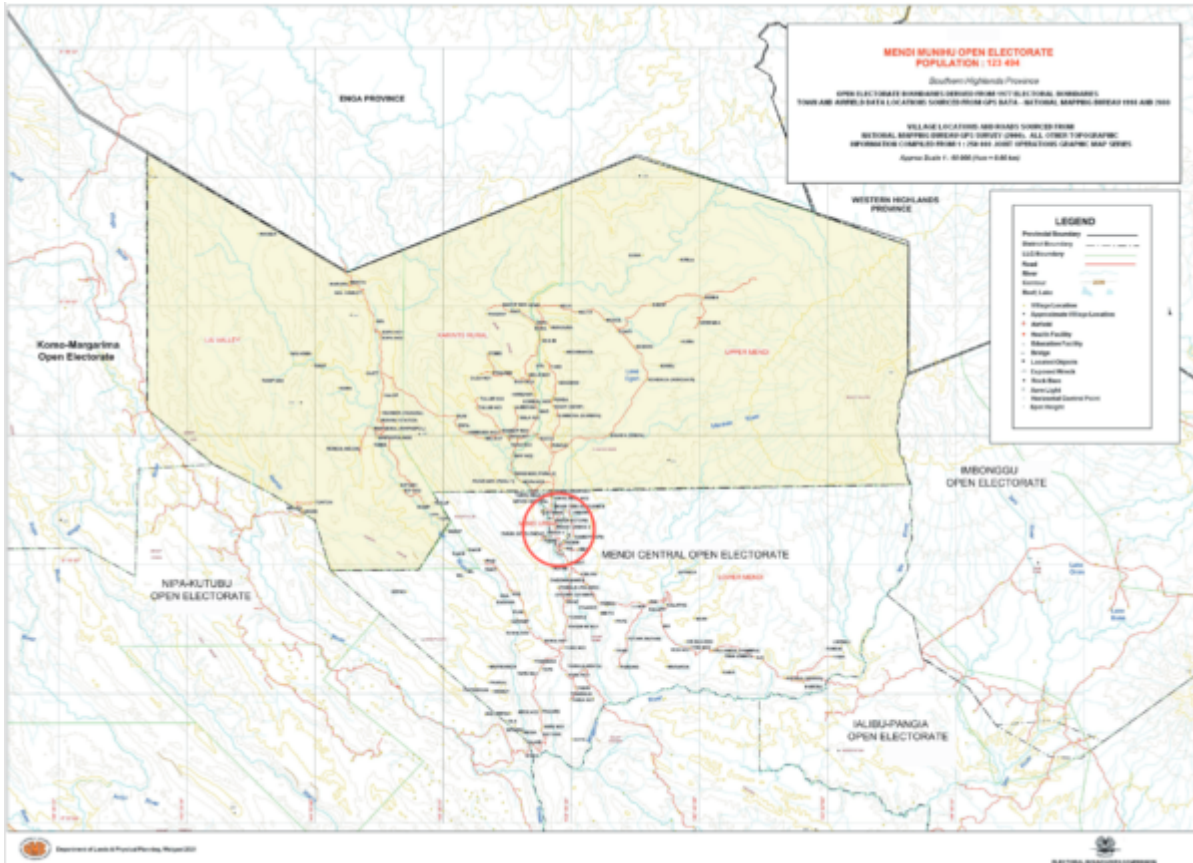
Mendi urban area indicated by red circle



Source: PNG Electoral Boundaries Commission

Figure 2: Mendi-Munihu electorate map

Mendi urban area indicated by red circle



Source: PNG Electoral Boundaries Commission

The answer to the question is unsettling: *Mendi is not in any electorate*. In Figures 1 and 2 we see the maps the electorates north and south of Mendi. To the south is Imbonggu (Figure 1). The red circle shows the Mendi urban area, outside of that electorate. To the north is Mendi-Munihi (Figure 2). The red circle again shows Mendi, outside the electorate. The maps differ in an important way. The Mendi-Munihi map has a southern border with “Mendi Central Open Electorate”, an electorate and district that does not exist yet, but is supposed to come into being in 2027. Imbonggu, on the other hand, has a northern border with Mendi-Munihi as it was before its redefinition.

These are not just any maps. These are the actual maps approved by the National Parliament when they accepted the recommendations of the Electoral Boundaries Commission (EBC) for creating new electorates in 2022. There is clearly a serious error here, a gap, and the entire town of Mendi, along with its environs, fell into it.

Mendi is not alone in finding itself in a gap in the new electoral map, and conversely, there are many more places which are currently assigned to *more than one* electorate. In two recent papers for the Department of Pacific Affairs *In Brief* series, Professor Nicole Haley and I outlined the **basic problem**, and the difference between PNG’s map of electorates and districts as they are established by law, and the map of these districts **as they are organised in practice**.

Papua New Guinea's electorate map remained mostly unchanged between 1977 and 2022. In 2011, two new Provincial electorates were created for the new Jiwaka and Hela provinces, but the underlying Open electorates were not altered. Papua New Guinea's constitution makes alterations to electorate boundaries very difficult, necessitating a report by the Electorate Boundaries Commission and approval by Parliament. This makes the electoral map resistant to political interference or gerrymandering, but it also makes it resistant to *any* change. Over a period of 45 years, serious issues of malapportionment accumulated, with the difference between the most and least populous electorates far outside the range prescribed by legislation. It was generally agreed that something had to be done about it.

In 2022, Papua New Guinea's parliament approved the formation of 13 new electorates. Seven of these were implemented for the 2022 election and another six were approved for the 2027 election. These new electorates will not solve the issue of malapportionment. Indeed, some of the new electorates created are "born noncompliant", with populations above or below the quota. The redistribution was also approved only a few months before the 2022 election, leaving little time to implement the changes. Nevertheless, the change to electoral boundaries was generally welcomed and seen as a step in the right direction.

It has, however, proven very challenging to find out what the redistricting really did to the electoral map. Unusually, the published report of the EBC did not include any maps or descriptions of boundary perimeters. Instead, the report defines the new electorates in terms of Local Level Governments and Wards. This is quite problematic, as LLGs boundaries are more vulnerable to political pressure, while Wards are points with no geographical extent. Drawing a map of an electorate using Wards would be like trying to draw a map of a country using only its cities.

This left researchers speculating on the proper placement of the new electorate boundaries. In most cases, the creation of the new electorates involved splitting existing electorates: the external boundary between the new electorates and others should not have been altered. Most people believed that the redrawing of the electoral map was limited to these changes. Nothing in the Electoral Boundaries Report would lead a reader to suspect otherwise.

At the end of 2024, we were able to track down the set of maps that were submitted to Parliament in the Parliamentary Library. As it turns out, the new electorate map includes *far more changes than is commonly understood*. Indeed, there were changes to a majority of electorates, with electorate boundaries altered in nearly every province. Only the changes within the electorates that were split were discussed in the EBC report or debated in Parliament.

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In several of the changed areas, the new boundaries have plausible impacts on electoral politics, yet they were adopted without public discussion. Indeed, given the difficulty in accessing electorate maps it is quite likely that the majority of the alterations remain at present unknown to the populations affected. While the lack of transparency in this process is concerning, the full set of issues stemming from this new electoral map is in fact considerably more serious: the new map set is inconsistent and contains numerous drafting errors.

Part 2 of this blog series will detail issues associated with the new electoral map.

View the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs In Brief papers published by Nicole Haley and Thiago Cintra Oppermann on the [problems arising from the 2022 electorate map](#), and the difference between PNG's map of electorates and districts as they are established by law, and the map of these districts [as they are organised in practice](#).

Disclosures:

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Author/s:

Thiago Cintra Oppermann

Dr Thiago Cintra Oppermann is a research fellow at the Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University. He is an anthropologist working on the history and social organisation of Bougainville, and electoral politics in Papua New Guinea.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/where-is-mendi-how-pngs-electoral-map-broke-part-1-20250121/>