

Where is Mendi? How PNG's electoral map broke: part 2

by Thiago Cintra Oppermann

24 January 2025



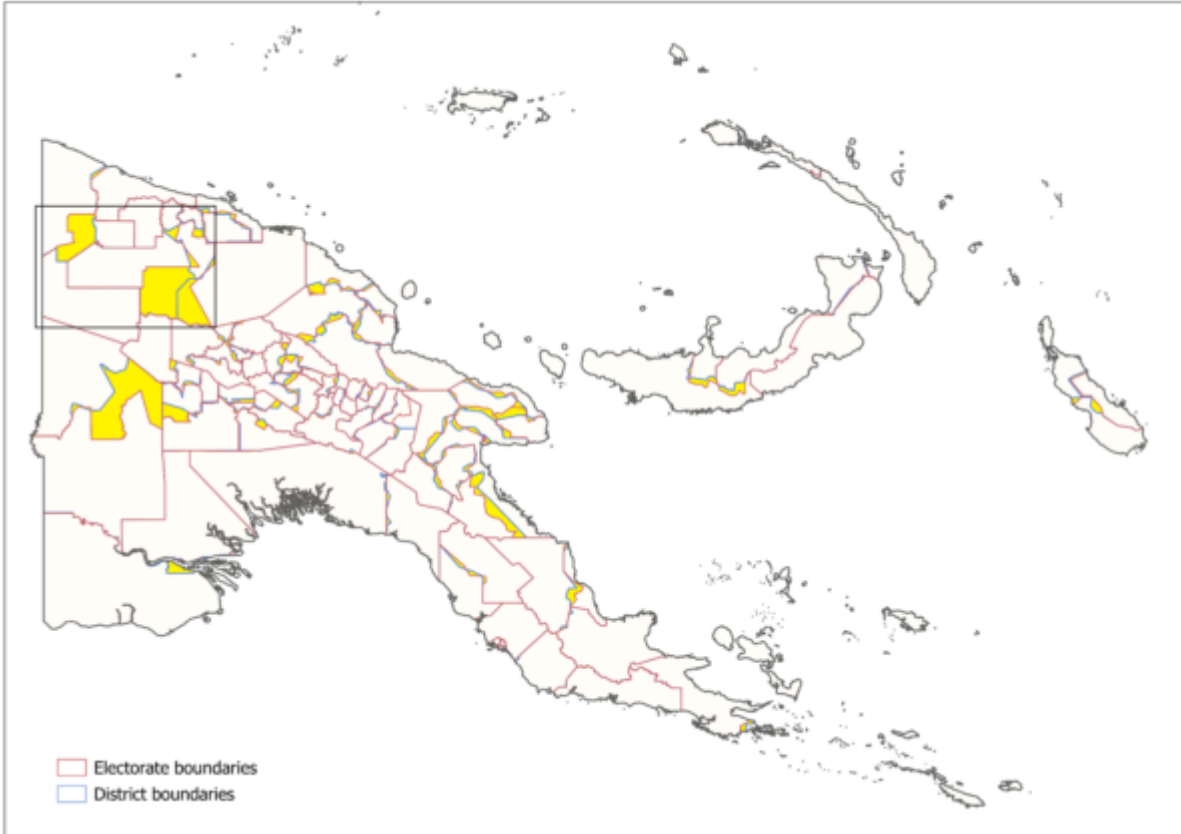
Looking towards Wewak, East Sepik
Photo Credit: [Flickr/Carsten ten Brink](#)

Part 1 of this two-part blog series explained the constitutional limitations on changes to PNG's electoral maps and the process that led to the most recent changes.

The new set of Electoral Boundary Commission (EBC) maps accepted by Parliament in 2022 not only makes unannounced changes, but also creates *inconsistent boundaries* between many electorates. Some areas are assigned to more than one electorate, while others are not assigned to any electorate. The latter include large, densely populated areas such as Unggai Local Level Government area in the Eastern Highlands and — astonishingly — the Mendi urban area and its environs in the Southern Highlands.

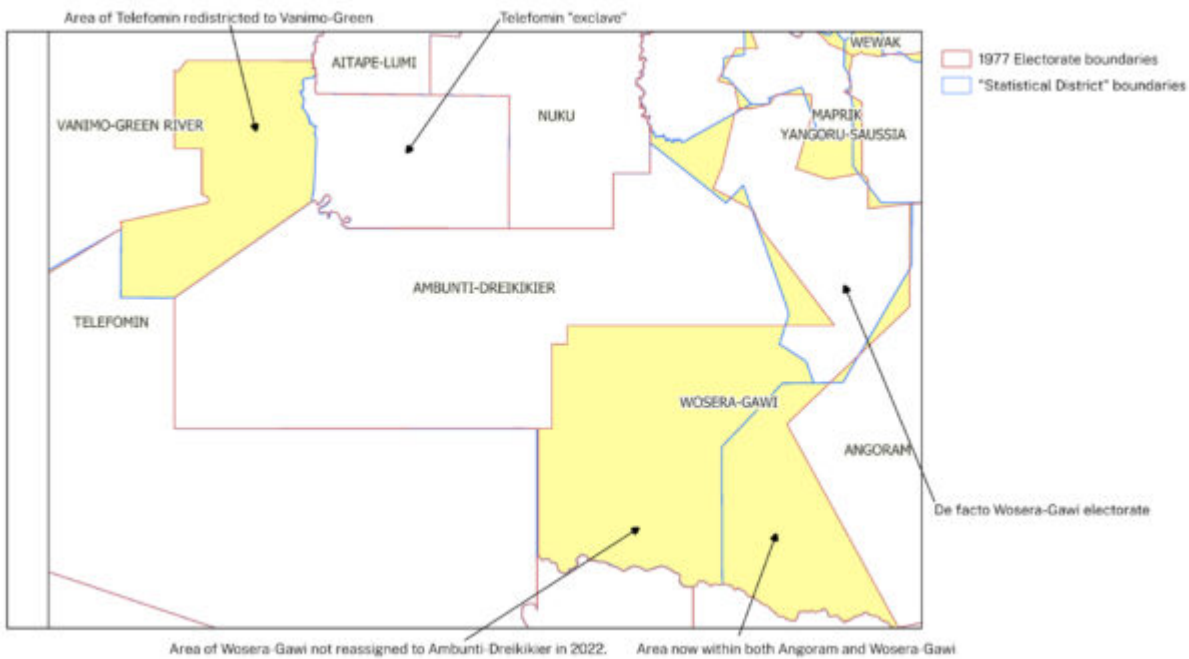
Figure 1 shows a map of PNG where we have superimposed the 1977 electorate boundaries and the National Statistical Office (NSO) map of “statistical districts”, the main source for the unannounced changes in 2022. The difference between the maps is highlighted in yellow. As can be readily seen, these are quite substantial. The box in Figure 1 is expanded in Figure 2 to give an example of the resulting situation in West Sepik (Sandaun) and East Sepik Provinces.

Figure 1: 1977 electorate boundaries and current statistical districts



Source: Oppermann and Haley. 1977 Electorate boundaries layer supplied by ANU CartoGIS.

Figure 2: West Sepik (Sandaun) and East Sepik Provinces showing 1977 electorate boundaries and current statistical districts



Source: Oppermann and Haley. 1977 Electorate boundaries layer supplied by ANU CartoGIS

In West Sepik (Saundaun) province, Telefomin was in created in 1977 as an approximately "C" shaped polygon. The NSO map differs, such that an area of

Telefomin is shown as part of the Vanimo-Green “statistical district”. The 2022 redistricting reassigned that section of Telefomin to Vanimo-Green. This renders Telefomin discontinuous, but at least both maps fit together, as the 1977 electorates were replaced with NSO geometry throughout. Such a complete replacement was also carried out in some other provinces, for instance Madang.

In East Sepik, the replacement is not complete, creating inconsistencies. Wosera-Gawi is a large electorate, shaped a bit like an hourglass in the 1977 map, but a much smaller “rump” in the NSO map. In this case, the 1977 map of Wosera Gawi was not changed in 2022. However, the 2022 mapset includes the NSO version of Angoram. In this NSO version, Angoram shares a border with Ambunti-Dreikikier – the blue line running down the middle of the southern portion of the 1977 Wosera-Gawi electorate. The yellow area east of this line is now assigned *both* to Wosera Gawi and to Angoram on their respective pages of the 2022 mapset. Ambunti-Dreikikier, to the west of Wosera-Gawi, was *not* changed, so its map does not show a border with Angoram. However, examination of the polling schedule shows that **the part of Wosera-Gawi electorate within the NSO boundaries of Ambunti-Dreikikier “statistical district” in fact polls in Ambunti-Dreikikier**. “Statistical districts” are in practice a closer approximation of Papua New Guinea’s actual *administrative* borders than the electoral map, including in matters of electoral administration.

There are many more similar cases, and others which are more complex as they combine maps from multiple sources. The Jiwaka-Western Highlands boundary near Anglimp is particularly complex, with at least three different, inconsistent source maps, some of which disagree with the provincial boundary. This is an important detail, as the provincial boundary has a separate definition and was not altered in 2022.

To appreciate the scale of the potential problems arising from this, we must consider two aspects of Papua New Guinean law. First, it is important to stress that the new set of maps is not simply a “bad representation” of electorates. They are the very *definition* of the electorates. It is this definition that has been, in many cases, broken. The Supreme Court of PNG has determined that the boundaries of open electorates are established on the basis of the maps and descriptions tendered with EBC recommendations, once these are approved by Parliament. Parliament, in turn, may *approve or reject* an EBC report, but not *amend* it. Therefore, the vote in 2022 approved *all* the maps, including those with unannounced changes, and those which are inconsistent.

Second, electorates have two essential functions. They are the foundation on which elections are run. Prior to the redistricting, there was *already* a widespread problem that the polling schedule followed “statistical districts”. This issue has earned the

PNG Electoral Commission [reprimands from the Supreme Court](#) in the past. Now the matter is considerably worse, with large areas for which there is no answer as to what, if anything, the true electorate is.

However, the function of electorates in the structure of the Papua New Guinean state goes beyond elections. Section 72(4) of the 1995 Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-Level Governments (OLPGLLG) established that the boundaries of a district are those of the electorate. Before 1995, electorates and districts had entirely distinct maps, but after 1995 electorates and districts should have [become coterminous](#).

The origins of the current problem can be traced in part to the failure to implement this change in definition. This would have required either redistricting electorates to match administrative realities after 1995, or else an updating of the administrative maps to match the electorates. Instead, multiple maps continued to be used, of which the NSO is the most common. This map has by now been adopted by [Google Maps](#), [Open Street Maps](#), the [United Nations Humanitarian Data Exchange](#) and [some](#) but [not all](#) Wikipedia pages. (The difference between the maps is readily apparent from the shape of the Western Highlands-Jiwaka border, correctly represented [here](#).)

In 2022, the uneasy coexistence of different district maps circled back to disrupt the very maps that define districts. We are now faced with the situation where in many cases electorate and therefore district boundaries overlap, and some cases in which areas are not legally in any district. The potential implications of this are disquieting. Districts are a keystone of Papua New Guinea's public administration and financing. It is very much unclear how, for example, District Service Improvement Program funds could be spent in an area not legally in any district, or who has responsibility for maintaining services in areas that are now in more than one district. Possibly, the incoherence of the maps will be ignored – but this is yet another step towards the informalisation of Papua New Guinea's state, and a potentially dangerous one.

What is to be done? The 2022 redistricting effort has inadvertently created a situation in which it may not be possible to carry out basic government functions, such as elections and provision of services, in full compliance with the law. It requires urgent attention.

There is only one way to solve the problem, and that is a Parliamentary vote approving a new, corrected set of maps. An opportunity for a relatively straightforward fix exists because the map set approved in 2022 only includes the electorates for that year's election, but the EBC report establishes also electorates for 2027. This will require a new set of maps, and when these are approved,

corrections can be made. Some of the most serious problems, such as Mendi's not falling within any electorate, would be solved in quite a straightforward manner, since Mendi Central Open Electorate, which will include Mendi urban area, is slated to be established in 2027. Other inconsistencies, however, would require a choice between different maps. Such choices are never without political implications.

A more lasting solution, however, would require a full EBC report — at which time other serious issues concerning PNG's electorates could be addressed, notably malapportionment and the impracticality of the 1977 boundaries under current administrative and political configurations. Such work would be demanding, expensive and time-consuming. But if there is one lesson to be learned from the broken 2022 electoral map, it is that utmost care and diligence must be applied to safeguarding this essential foundation of PNG's political and administrative infrastructure.

View the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs In Brief papers 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](#).

Correction (24/1): Figure 2 label is West Sepik (Sandaun) and East Sepik Provinces.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/where-is-mendi-how-pngs-electoral-map-broke-part-2/>