



# PUBLIC POLICY BLOG

## 2024 Census must provide accurate data for the review of electoral boundaries

Wilson Kumne

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The Papua New Guinea (PNG) National Population Census is set to commence on the July 2024. The adopted theme “Be counted, no one left behind” emphasises the importance of accurately counting every individual in the census process. However, one can also add “count once” into the theme, to emphasise the importance of transparency and accuracy and no duplication or manipulation for political or other reasons. Before the 2024 national population census begins, the National Statistical Office (NSO) and census officials must clearly understand that this census data will be used for important decisions that will either bring negative or positive impacts in the future.

### Importance of census data in electoral boundaries review

The review of electoral boundaries is an important task carried by the Electoral Boundaries Commission (EBC), legislatively guided by the the Organic Law on the National and Local Level Government Elections (ONLLGE). This means that EBC is required to review electoral boundaries every 10 years, right after the national population census, to make sure the size of an electorate is within the calculated range, 98,180 to 147,270 population threshold. EBC then makes recommendation for adjustments of electoral boundaries if necessary.

Today, of the 96 districts (each district equates to an electorate) of PNG, only 36 are compliant, 60 electorates are not compliant. 21 of the 60 non-compliant electorates are above the upper limit and

39 are below the lower limit. Yet, according to the Organic Law, a district population must be within the population range of the 20 percent threshold. Therefore, the boundaries of the 60 electorates should be reviewed with a view to redistributing their populations and redrawing the boundaries. Population is the major factor in determining electorates, therefore population data accuracy is vital.

### 2021 estimate population data and its inaccuracy

PNG constitution mandates that each electorate should have an approximately equal population. 2021 estimate population currently recognised by GoPNG and its stakeholders have 3 percent errors. According to 2021 estimated population data, there are unprecedented population growth of over 150 percent in Milne Bay, Hela, Southern Highlands provinces and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (AROB). The Hela Province population in 2021 is two times its population in 2011. Table 1 shows the population growth of each province from 2011 to 2021.

Table: 1 2011-2021 Population Growth

Province	2011 Population	2021 Population	Population Growth (%)
Hela	249,449	765,142	206.84
Milne Bay	276,512	748,196	170.59
AROB	249,358	641,431	157.16
SHP	510,245	927,306	81.74
WSP	248,411	421,470	69.65

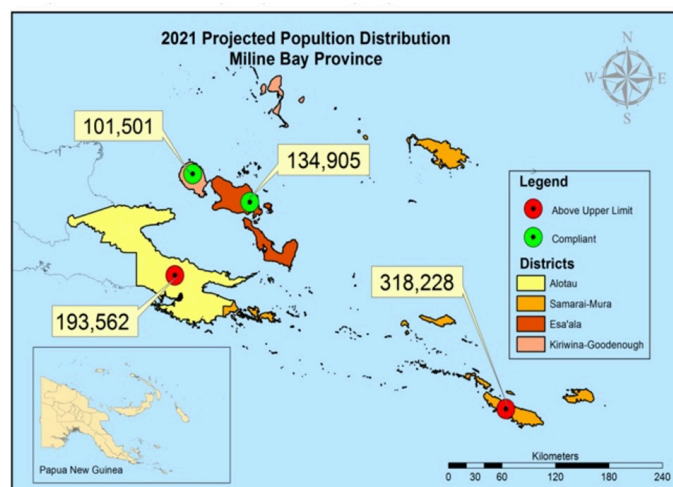
Morobe	674,810	1,139,789	68.83
Madang	493,906	797,807	61.54
Western	201,351	315,273	56.56
ESP	450,530	681,518	51.22
WHP	362,850	531,402	46.46
Northern	186,309	271,193	45.53
Simbu	376,473	535,457	42.21
NCD	364,125	513,918	41.19
ENB	328,369	457,169	39.25
EHP	579,825	784,535	35.33
WNB	264,264	356,343	34.8
Central	269,756	362,768	34.48
Enga	432,045	571,060	32.16
Jiwaka	343,987	451,496	31.25
Gulf	158,197	201,388	27.27
Manus	60,485	74,547	23.23
New Ireland	194,067	232,351	19.74

Source: NSO

While there is unprecedented population growth in some provinces, some places also have very small growths. For example, Kimbe Urban LLG have a population growth of 4.41 percent from 2011 to 2021. The inaccuracy in population data is a challenge faced not only in electoral boundaries review but also in service delivery, policy, planning and decision-making process. Any decisions made based on the 2021 projected population cannot be justified at this stage.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of 2021 population in Milne Bay Province by districts. Esa'ala and Kiriwina-Goodenough districts are compliant to the calculated range for electorate population while the Alotau and Samarai-Murua districts are not compliant and, going by the rules, should split into new districts. If the 2021 population estimates are correct, Baniara electorate can be split from Alotau in 2027 National General Election (NGE), and Samarai-Murua can split into three electorates. However, the population growth in Hela Province has questionable growth of nearly 200%. The 2024 census will justify the 2021 projected population data. Therefore, the 2024 census is very important for electoral boundaries review.

Figure 1. 2021 projected population distribution of Milne Bay Province



### What can be done to the census process to achieve accurate data in 2024 census?

The 2024 National Population Census is very important. This census will be seen as an assessment of the accuracy of the 2011 census and 2021 projected population data. It will also be used as the index reference data for future. By law, however, the EBC will conduct its electoral boundaries review after the 2024 census. Six new districts were recommended for 2027 National General Election (NGE) according to the Electoral Boundaries Commission (2021) report. However, some of the districts may not be eligible to be an electorate considering their population sizes. After the census and before NGE, the EBC must conduct electoral boundaries review because some of the new districts and those recommended for 2027 NGE may not be eligible for demarcation as electorates.

As population data is important in decision making, policy planning and implementation, the challenge is on NSO and the census officials to conduct an accurate national population census. The following points must be considered.

- *Avoid duplication.* Rapid migrations and temporary or undocumented populations can cause duplications. 2024 census must avoid duplications. Citizens must register individually, census officials must not register or allow other people to register absentees. Families in rural

areas must not register for their family members living in urban areas.

- *Avoid political interference.* Political influence can compromise the objectivity of the census. This may lead to manipulations in the census data for political interests.
- *Proper planning.* This is crucial to ensure all aspects of the census process are well-organised and executed efficiently by defining targeted population and designing appropriate data collection method.
- *Accuracy assessment.* Before census data is declared and released for public use, accuracy assessment must be done for consistency and to identify and rectify errors in the data collected. Corrections or adjustments must be made before declaring the official census data.

## Conclusion

The importance of accurate population data plays a crucial role in PNG's electoral boundaries review. A transparent and well-informed electoral boundaries review process, underpinned by reliable population data, plays a critical role in upholding legislative values, ensuring fair representation, and equitable distribution of resources and services. It has been argued that the 2000 population census was more credible than the

2011 census. The NSO has the chance to redeem itself with a more credible 2024 population census.

## About the Author

**Wilson Kumne** is a Senior Research Officer with the Economic Policy Research Program at the PNG National Research Institute (PNGNRI). He has a Bachelor's Degree in Geographic Information Science (GIS) and a Master of Philosophy in Geomatics (MPhil) from the PNG University of Technology (PNG UNITECH). His research interests are in the areas of economics, politics and governances and GIS approaches to climate change mitigation, agricultural development, land management and development and natural resources management.