

Record turnout in first HK vote amid unrest

Written by Taipei Times

Monday, 25 November 2019 06:49 - Last Updated Monday, 25 November 2019 06:52

A record number of Hong Kongers had cast ballots in district elections by yesterday afternoon, with hours to go before polls were due to close, as they seized the first opportunity to vote after months of increasingly violent protests calling for greater democracy.

About 2.5 million people, or about 60 percent of the electorate, had voted by 6:30pm, the Hong Kong government said.

The previous highest turnout was 1.47 million in 2015.

Residents faced unusually long lines at polling stations across the territory as they came out to vote in the district council elections.

"There's so many people it's brought tears to my eyes," said Ng Siu-hong, a councilor for the Central and Western District. "It's good for me, but more importantly good for democracy."

The vote proceeded peacefully and as scheduled, despite prior warnings from Hong Kong officials that it could be postponed.

There were concerns after some candidates came under attack and the territory was paralyzed by days of chaos, with schools suspended, protesters blocking roads and disrupting commutes, and riot police laying siege to a university.

Polls were due to close at 10:30pm and results were expected early today.

The vote came at a time of unprecedented political polarization in the territory, with divisions hardening as the protests turn more violent.

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While most Hong Kongers support the protesters' goals of an independent inquiry into police abuses and meaningful elections, they are also increasingly fed up with tactics including vandalizing transport networks, seizing universities and using medieval-style weapons.

"It's kind of a referendum on the government and everything that's happened over the past five months," said Chi Jia Tschang, a senior director in the Hong Kong office of BowerGroupAsia, which advises companies on business and political risk in the region. "People still want an opportunity to work within the system to have their voices heard. That's why there's so much focus on this."

The district council is the lowest rung of government in the territory and councilors have few real powers, mostly advising the Hong Kong chief executive on matters like fixing parks and organizing community activities.

Its elections have typically been plagued by low voter turnout and are not hugely competitive, compared with those for the more powerful Hong Kong Legislative Council.

However, they are being closely watched this year as the first democratic exercise since the protests began in June. Enthusiasm is high among pro-democracy forces, who are hopeful they can pressure Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam's (林鄭月娥) administration to become more compromising.

Lord Alton of Liverpool, an independent election observer who was visiting areas around polling stations in the afternoon, was upbeat about the situation.

"The turnout is significantly up so far on previous elections, more than double from four years ago," he said. "The absence so far during the day of protests means there shouldn't be any negative reason for people feeling unable to go out to vote."

District councilors help appoint 117 of the 1,200 electors who select the chief executive, which would give pro-democracy forces more choice over candidates who must nevertheless still be approved by Beijing.

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Source: [Taipei Times - 2019/11/25](#)