

The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) maintained its grip on power in yesterday's local government elections despite an improved showing by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Voter turnout was 66.32 percent nationwide.

The KMT took 12 of the 17 mayor and commissioner positions up for grabs, while the DPP won four, and one went to an independent, formerly KMT candidate.

The DPP increased its share of the overall vote to 45.9 percent, up from 38.2 percent four years ago, while taking back control of the hotly contested Yilan County after losing it to the KMT four years ago.

The result in Yilan County, with the DPP's Lin Tsong-shyan (林宗男) coming out on top, will be seen as a sharp personal rebuke to President and KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), who made 10 trips to the county to stump for his party's candidate, Commissioner Lu Guo-hua (盧國華).

HUALIEN

The KMT also suffered a blow in Hualien County, where independent candidate Fu Kun-chi (傅昆城) defeated Du Li-hua (杜麗華) by a massive margin of 46,929 votes.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Yilan County commissioner candidate Lin Tsong-shyan, fourth left, is accompanied by former DPP premier Yu Shyi-kun, second left, and other supporters at his Luodong campaign headquarters after his victory was announced yesterday.

Fu was kicked out of the KMT after deciding to run even though he was not barred under the party's anti-corruption regulations.

Yesterday's polls were the first major election since Ma took office in May last year and was seen by many as a mid-term test of his administration.

Ma blamed the party's disappointing performance on the "overall environment," such as the economy and unemployment.

Accompanied by Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) and KMT Secretary-General Chan Chun-po (陳冲波), Ma acknowledged the defeats in Hualien and Yilan, but highlighted the KMT's victories elsewhere.

"Our performance is not as good as expected in terms of the cities and counties we won and the overall turnout. However, it is the overall environment, rather than any single factor, that contributed to the outcome," Ma said at a post-election press conference at the KMT headquarters.

“We will thoroughly examine government performance, urge the Cabinet to revive the economy and fight corruption,” he said.

‘IMPROVEMENTS’

In response to DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen’s () description of the results as a sign of opposition to Ma’s cross-strait policies, Ma said the majority of the public supports these policies, but that the government will listen to the public and make “improvements” if necessary.

He declined to say whether the outcome reflected the plunge in his approval ratings or whether there would be a personnel reshuffle in the party or government.

However, Ma said the party would discuss measures tomorrow against members who violated party regulations by campaigning for non-party candidates.

When Ma was party chairman four years ago, he made a dramatic vow to resign as chairman if the KMT failed to win at least half the seats available. Ma did not make the same promise this year and played down the importance of the polls ahead of yesterday, describing them as local, small-scale elections.

As for the party’s defeat in Hualien, Ma said the KMT “did the right thing” by not nominating Fu.

DPP PLEASED

At a post-election press conference last night, Tsai said the results were a major confidence booster and motivation for the DPP to improve in the coming days, urging party members to continue to stand united in the future.

“We are encouraged by the results, but we are not necessarily content. We still have a long road ahead of us with many things to be done,” Tsai said after taking a deep bow to show the party’s gratitude to those who supported the campaign.

Tsai said that yesterday’s estimated turnout for the DPP was its highest ever, apart from the 2004 presidential race.

Although the DPP only won four of the 17 county and city heads, many DPP candidates managed to narrow the gap — an indication that the public is fed up with the Ma administration and that the DPP is recovering from tough times, she said.

“We call on the government to stop ignoring public opinion. No matter how much the KMT hopes to dissociate the election results from the government’s performance, it is impossible,” she said, calling yesterday’s results a no-confidence vote in the KMT.

These polls were widely viewed as a mid-term election for Ma and Tsai, but Tsai said for the

KMT loses Yilan and Hualien

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DPP it was a group effort from the beginning. She declined to say whether it would affect her status in the party or her chances of running for president in 2012.

□ ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY LOA IOK-SIN

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