

For those who are familiar with the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) history, the seven-in-one elections in November would be reminiscent of the mayoral and commissioner elections in 1997, when the party defeated the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in terms of the number of elected mayors and commissioners.

To most people's surprise, the DPP achieved its most successful campaign in local elections to date, going from having six local government leaders to 12. The result put it ahead of the KMT's eight and left the DPP in charge of 70 percent of the nation's population.

The feat, later given the term "besieging the cities from the countryside (包圍戰)," paved the way for the first regime change two-and-a-half years later when Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) was elected president.

The backdrop to the unprecedented victory 17 years ago was strikingly similar to this year's election — an underperforming KMT, an ambitious DPP and voters longing for change. Even the election date, Nov. 29, is the same.

However, people should not forget one final factor, which was arguably the 1997 elections' turning point. DPP lawmaker Lu Hsiu-yi (呂秀蓮), who was seriously ill with lung cancer, kneeled on stage on the eve of the election to solicit votes for Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌), the DPP candidate for Taipei County.

Advised by doctors to stay in hospital, Lu insisted on making what could have been — and it later transpired it was — his final campaign for Su, his main rival in the DPP primary for the county race.

The heart-wrenching and touching scene that showed Lu's selflessness, if one looks back on the history of the election, was the final push for voters to come out en masse and vote for the DPP.

In search of the spirit of Lu Hsiu-yi

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Lu passed away in August 1998 at the age of 57, only nine months after the DPP's victory, and was unable to witness the first transition of power in the nation's history, but his actions on that fateful night put an illuminating footnote to the unselfishness of the first generation of DPP politicians, who seemed to always have their eyes on the main goal rather than personal gain.

The poor governance of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration, in particular its failure to revive the economy, its continued shift toward China and its unconstitutional actions, appear to have set the stage for a DPP comeback.

A series of corruption scandals in local governments has not helped Ma either as recent public opinion polls conducted in various constituencies show that the KMT could be facing a serious challenge from the DPP even in its traditional strongholds, such as Keelung and Taoyuan County.

However, past records also show that the DPP cannot afford to underestimate the KMT's strength when it comes to local elections, since the KMT has always enjoyed more solid and sophisticated grassroots organization and much more resources.

Public opinion polls could also be deceiving. It is hard to believe that KMT Taipei mayoral candidate Sean Lien (連戰) trails independent candidate Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) by more than 20 percentage points in a constituency where the pan-green camp has never secured more than 42 percent of the votes.

While some analysts have optimistically talked about a possible five-one victory for the DPP in the special municipalities, DPP Chairperson Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) goal of winning nine or 10 out of the 22 seats up for grabs in the mayoral and commissioner elections could be more pragmatic.

It has been unfortunate that DPP campaigns, in particular in Taipei and New Taipei City, have been caught up in meaningless mud-slinging with the KMT.

If the DPP wants to duplicate its success of 1997, it must look to Lu inspiration because a

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political party wins people's heart by pursuing the greater good, not by the failure of its rivals.

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