

Sarkozy to rejig government after poll defeat
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France's President Nicolas Sarkozy was left scrambling for a way to relaunch his once relentless reform drive on Monday, after a humiliating defeat in nationwide regional elections.

Prime Minister Francois Fillon was to meet the French leader at 9:00 am (0800 GMT) following Sunday's debacle, which left Sarkozy's right-wing UMP in charge of only one of France's mainland regions.

There have been reports that Fillon will offer to resign, but at the very least observers expect a cabinet reshuffle that will signal a new start in Sarkozy's campaign to persuade France to swallow difficult reforms.

"Tonight's result confirms the success of the left's lists. We have not been convincing," Fillon admitted Sunday after the Socialist-led opposition beat the UMP by around 54 percent to 36.

"This is a disappointment for the governing party. I take my share of responsibility, and tomorrow morning I'll take this up with the president."

If confirmed, the estimates - based on samples of cast ballots by polling agencies - leave Sarkozy's supporters in control of only one of France's 22 mainland regions, their right-wing stronghold of Alsace.

Rejection by the left

The left, dominated by the Socialist Party, appeared to have held onto the mainland and the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe and to have won a tight race to wrest Corsica from the UMP.

The UMP consoled itself with having taken back French Guyana and the Indian Ocean island of Reunion in the vote to elect the regional councils that are in charge of transport, education and cultural policy.

"The French have expressed their rejection of the politics of the president and the government," Socialist party leader Martine Aubry said, calling on the left to unite behind a programme to retake power at a national level.

Turnout, although low, was around four percent higher than in last week's first round. Polling agencies TNS-Sofres and OpinionWay separately predicted that the second round abstention rate would be 49 percent.

Last week's first-round vote saw the French leader's right-wing supporters win their lowest share of the vote in more than three decades. The party's final score was higher but still low enough to constitute a stark defeat.

Sarkozy, who still has a comfortable majority in the national parliament, has insisted that the regional poll is not a verdict on central government, but he is expected to order a reshuffle in the next few days.

Media shaming

For many French newspapers however, it was the president rather than his government or his prime minister who was to blame for the right's poor electoral showing.

Monday's edition of the Lyon-based paper Le Progres mocked Sarkozy as the "hyper president" who had become the "hyper loser"; Le Telegramme, another regional daily, attacked what it described as Sarkozy's autocratic style.

The results "send the same message all across France and obliges the head of state to read it as a national punishment and thus to come up with answers to the concerns of the electorate," said the regional daily La Montagne.

Certainly, the result was another blow to a president whose personal approval ratings are at an all-time low and will likely increase pressure within his own party for a change of direction.

One opinion poll Monday suggested that most French people wanted the president to change his approach to leading the country.

The poll, by CSA for Le Parisien newspaper, had 54 percent of those polled agreeing that Sarkozy should adopt a "more presidential style".

Only 30 percent of the 2,004 respondents questioned Sunday thought he should maintain his present style.

- AFP

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