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# *The Sri Lanka Monitor*

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## Premadasa offers promise to Sri Lanka's poor

IN AN ELECTION campaign marked by bloodshed and belligerence, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa of the United National Party (UNP) was declared President on 20 December, after achieving a slender victory over Mrs Srimavo Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Mr Premadasa, aged 64, secured 50.4% of votes cast, narrowly surpassing the 50% necessary for outright victory, while Mrs Bandaranaike polled 44.9%. The third candidate Mr Ossie Abeygunesekara of the left-wing Sri Lankan People's Party won only 4.6% of the vote. Around 5.1 million people turned out at 8,000 polling stations in 22 electoral districts to vote for Sri Lanka's second executive President - in itself a significant achievement in the face of a crescendo of killings and intimidation that marked the two-week period prior to the election.

Up until the day of the election, rumour was rife in Colombo of a last-minute cancellation. The safety of 80,000 election officials, food hoarding, fractured communications and the deadly paralysis of essential services in the south by the insurgent Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) who had decreed death to voters and politicians alike, seemed to present insurmountable problems to an administration already under siege.

The outgoing President J.R. Jayawardene, it was said, had asked Britain for Gurka troops to police the poll, and state employees were being kept at their workplace at gunpoint.

An elusive group of 'anti-subversives' - reportedly Special Task Force commandos calling themselves the 'Peoples Revolutionary Red Army' (PRRA) - had embarked on an assassination campaign of suspected JVP members in the south, leaving over 200 mutilated corpses crudely decorated with anti-JVP slogans lying by rural roadsides in two weeks of open terror. The government, it was said, was fighting fire with fire. An unrepentant Mr Jayawardene in an exclusive interview with *The Times* on 16 December would not condemn the PRRA counter insurgency and admitted regular human rights abuses by Sri Lanka's security forces. True to type *the Old Man* dissolved Parliament, conceding the need for a caretaker government only the day after the Presidential poll.

In the event, Sri Lanka's disintegrating democracy staggered over the electoral finishing line with little to spare. The turn-out of 55% confounded gloomy expectations although 23 people died in poll-related violence. A jubilant Mr Premadasa hailed his triumph as 'a victory of the ballot over the bullet' while Mrs Bandaranaike, flourishing books of unmarked ballot papers recovered from police stations, accused the UNP of poll-rigging, the murder of five SLFP workers, and predicted 'a Cory Aquino-style uprising'.

Undoubtedly question marks remain - particularly over the anomaly of the UNP's success in rural areas difficult to police and Mrs Bandaranaike's predominance in many of the urban areas

where monitoring was high and vote-tampering less likely - but the consensus is that Mr Premadasa is a shrewd and able fighter who deserves his chance to tackle Sri Lanka's problems on the strength of his record. His lower caste background breaks the mould of Sri Lankan leadership. Likewise, the 'million houses by 2000 AD' programme and a promise to take almost a million people above the poverty line by raising food stamp payments from Rs 500 to Rs 2,500 - as well as his iron grip on local Government - will have secured many votes for this self-styled 'servant of the people'. Where there is doubt is over his ability to control the army and his facility with the economy. Speaking to the nation at his inauguration ceremony at the ancient hill capital of Kandy on 2 January, Mr. Premadasa urged 'dialogue, compromise and consensus' between Sri Lanka's warring ethnic and political factions, in such a way that did not invite intervention from outside - a veiled reference to the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in northern Sri Lanka. The previous day, the Indian High Commission in Colombo announced 'a phased withdrawal' of IPKF forces in the North beginning in the next two weeks with two battalions of around 3,000 men, a move regarded by most observers as merely symbolic. If Mr Premadasa has started as he means to continue, then he must find genuine solutions to the chronic political instability that threatens his long-term goal of economic regeneration.

## THE NORTH

**Overtures among the ruins**

TENSION remained high in Jaffna and the North throughout December as parties and candidates on the Presidential Election bandwagon sought new allies of old enemies and last minute support from a population benumbed by a fifteen-month war of attrition staged in their own streets.

Rival hit-squads from the militant Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) - leaders of the new North-Eastern administration - continue to eliminate suspected opponents and innocent civilians alike sources say, in what are seen as callous attempts to intimidate local opinion. Around 115 LTTE members or sympathisers were reportedly killed this month by "unknown persons". Bands of EPRLF working with IPKF units have been seen stopping people in the street and openly extorting money. The current price of release from one of the many Detention Camps - IPKF or otherwise - is said to be Rs 100,000 (US\$ 3,000).

IPKF cordon-and-search operations in the area continue to use the hated and feared 'thalaiyati' (Tamil: 'headshakers') hooded men from IPKF-aligned militant groups who point out supposed LTTE sympathisers among the local population. Round-ups this month in Moolai, Vaddukottai, Mavadi-chanthi and Kachchai led to the arrest of over 100 Tamil youths. During the election period there were a number of clashes and in the worst of these, the IPKF are alleged to have shot dead 14 civilians in retaliation, in an unnamed area of Jaffna.

In the run-up to the election there was a flurry of flying visits

and secret rendezvous. Prime Minister Premadasa, addressing an election meeting at Jaffna Central College on 12 December, promised to fulfil the regional aspirations of all Sri Lanka's ethnic groups. SLFP MP Anura Bandaranaike and Tamil Congress leader Kumar Ponnambalam were reported to have met with LTTE second-in-command *Mahataya* deep in the Vavuniya jungles in mid-December to solicit LTTE support for Mrs Bandaranaike's political platform - a support that was not forthcoming.

EPRLF leader Padmanabha, who is said to be directing the North-East administration from above, met secretly in isolated locations with a number of prominent Jaffna citizens earnestly seeking their co-operation with the new regime. At a Press Conference in Jaffna on 13 December Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) leader Balakumar stated that the Provincial Council elections had shown that Tamils in the North and East wanted peace. EROS would accept the people's verdict, surrender its weapons and enter the democratic process. A political party, the Eelam People's Democratic Front would be formed to contest the general election on 15 February.

Who will emerge as indispensable from these deadly cat-and-mouse games remains unclear in a post-election period with deals still being struck and another election on the way. The LTTE, however, in a statement released just before Mr Premadasa's inauguration vowed to "continue its struggle against the Indian occupation forces until the total withdrawal from the Tamil homeland".

**Expelled**

Hundreds of Sri Lankan workers in the Maldivé Islands were asked to leave the country in early December after last month's unsuccessful coup, reportedly staged by Sri Lankan Tamil militant mercenaries.

**Compensation**

The Indian Army has paid out \$3.3 million in compensation to the families of 589 soldiers killed fighting Tamil militants in northern Sri Lanka, State Defence Minister Chintamani Panigrahi told the Indian Parliament in mid-December.

**Jail break**

Some 225 prisoners including key JVP leaders escaped from Sri Lanka's main prison at Welikada after an attack on 13 December. Around thirty prisoners and a number of their accomplices were shot dead.

**Emergency to end**

Some 474 people died in political killings throughout Sri Lanka between 16 November and 14 December, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Vincent Perera told Sri Lanka's Parliament on 16 December during the debate on the continuation of the State of Emergency. National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali said on 23 December that the new President will not ask for an extension of the Emergency when it lapses on 15 January.

**Summit in Colombo**

Sri Lanka is to host the fifth summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation next year.

# The spoils of peace

ALTHOUGH initial reports suggest the turn-out for Presidential elections in the Eastern Districts to be well above the national average (Trincomalee 52.8%, Batticaloa 79.64%, Amparai 71.17%), local attention remained firmly focused on the emergent regional administration formed after last month's Provincial Council elections.

At the inaugural session of the North-Eastern Provincial Council in Trincomalee on 5 December, the 17 elected members of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress and the sole United National Party representative refused to participate in the proceedings alleging that they were offered no escorts or guarantees of safety by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

Undeterred, the new Chief Minister Varadaraja Perumal, who leads the ruling EPRLF/ENDLF coalition - Tamil groups who support the IPKF and the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord - set out an ambitious programme in mid-December to renegotiate the current devolution package and to raise a Civilian Volunteer Force to maintain law and order in the North-Eastern province.

Some 800 youths were already training with the IPKF throughout the North, he said, and talks would begin shortly with the Sri Lankan Army over the induction of Tamil personnel. Both measures were to facilitate the withdrawal of IPKF troops over an eight month period.

Reactions to the new administration have been cautious but largely positive. The victory of the EPRLF/ENDLF coalition is seen by many not so much as a vote for the erstwhile militants, but as a necessary first step towards reasserting the democratic

## The East regains an appetite for democratic politics

process. While there have been electoral irregularities and impersonations - some say 10-20% of the poll - these are not seen as unprecedented in Sri Lankan politics, and an important hurdle has been cleared.

Behind the scenes in the new government a struggle for power between the ENDLF - the infamous "Three Stars" group - and the dominant EPRLF was only resolved by a compromise backed by Indian High Commissioner J. N. Dixit leaving Law and Order in the hands of the EPRLF Chief Minister Varadaraja Perumal, while giving the critical portfolios of Land, Rehabilitation and Agriculture to ENDLF nominee C.M. Ganeshalingam, former Assistant Government Agent in Trincomalee.

Late in December, in Batticaloa at a summit of Tamil groups ferried in by IPKF helicopter, an agreement was hammered out between TULF, TELO, EPRLF and ENDLF to assign constituencies to each group in the forthcoming general elections on 15 February in the North and East which would remain uncontested by the others. The Tamil Congress party led by Kumar Ponnambalam is likely to oppose the new "Tamil Front" however in a number of areas, as are EROS who participated in the first day of the talks, but later withdrew.

A referendum on the merger of the North and Eastern Provinces will be held on 5 July, National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali announced in early January.

## Trincomalee Army base attacked

IN A DRAMATIC attack on Sumedhagama Sri Lankan Army Camp in Trincomalee town on 13 December, by around 30 armed Tamil youths reportedly dressed in Indian Army uniforms, five of the attackers were killed and four civilians injured in the crossfire, security sources revealed earlier this month.

A statement released by the Indian High Commission in Colombo the following day, denied the attack alleging that a Sri Lankan Army unit had fired on a motor vehicle killing the five occupants and one member of an IPKF patrol in the vicinity. The patrol returned fire in self-defence only, the statement maintained and three Sri Lankan security personnel were injured.

Scores of Sinhalese residents

close to the Army base took shelter in Sangamitta refugee camp, fearing further violence. The clash was reportedly the rekindling of a long-running feud between the Sinhalese community and IPKF-backed Tamil militant groups, who are accused of diverting vital water supplies from the area and of intimidating civilians.

Following widespread reports that the attackers were from a Tamil group close to the IPKF, Lt. Gen. Kalkat flew to Colombo for talks with Defence Secretary General Sepala Attygalle.

■ Heavy rains in Batticaloa and Amparai in late December have led to flooding, serious food shortages and spiralling prices. Transport and civil administration are also seriously affected.

## MONITORING THE ELECTION

## Presidential poll flawed but fair say SAARC observers

IN AN INTERIM statement released on 21 December by a non-governmental Observation Group drawn from eminent jurists of four countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) who travelled to Sri Lanka on 16 December to observe the Presidential elections, the ten-member team said that in the face of intimidation and actual violence the electoral process, although flawed, did in fact take its course and should be viewed positively.

The group had divided into five teams monitoring Colombo, Matara, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Jaffna, observing the voting at 131 polling stations. At most of the polling stations visited, officials were said to be in place and functioning effectively. The group noted, however, that the non-distribution of polling cards in a number of districts giving the voter's number in the register and his polling station, may have contributed towards the reduced turnout.

In certain districts such as Jaffna, where the poll was less than 20%, no polling agents appointed by candidates were in attendance and in Galle, Matara, Matale and Vavuniya often representatives of only one of the parties were present.

The Observer Group received a number of representations alleging electoral irregularities, State interference and abnormally high voting in violence-affected areas which should have resulted in low polls.

Alluding to its terms of reference, the group said that these were offences to be investigated by the appropriate national authorities.

The People's Action for Fair Free Elections group (PAFFREL), a non-partisan mass movement to monitor the election organised by some 30 Sri Lankan NGOs, also set up observer units at the district level in nine electoral districts. Headed by ex-ambassador Neville Kanakaratne of the National Amity Movement and Godfrey Gunetilleke of the Marga Institute, the group will shortly produce a report based on its observations.

Some observers have commented that the limited role of such observer groups may have the negative effect of legitimising a suspect poll. This is certainly the view of the defeated SLFP candidate Mrs Bandaranaike who on 21 December declared that she would petition the Supreme Court to have the UNP victory declared null and void on the grounds of blatant malpractice and misuse of State power.

In the aftermath away from the eerie quiet of urban areas, the killings have continued. There has been less violence after the election than was feared, but more than has been reported in the Press and on radio, in a judicious display of self-censorship. In the Hill country on the Elahala Estate in Matale 56 line-rooms - accommodation for Tamil Plantation workers and their families - were burned down, allegedly by Sinhalese groups on 23 December, causing 300 families to take refuge in the Selvapillaiyar Temple. The Ceylon Workers Congress moved quickly to establish 50-strong Home Guard teams on each estate throughout the plantation areas.

The SRI LANKA MONITOR is part of an information processing service set up by the British Refugee Council to keep Sri Lankan refugees in Britain, Europe and elsewhere, informed about the current situation in their home areas.

If you have any information you wish to share, or any enquiries you wish to make regarding developments in Sri Lanka, contact:

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## Viraj Mendis appeal denied

VIRAJ MENDIS, the Sinhalese socialist who has spent two years in sanctuary in a Manchester church, was refused leave on 21 December to appeal to the House of Lords against a Home Office order deporting him to Sri Lanka.

An application to the High Court by his lawyers a week later to delay his expulsion was also turned down. They now intend to take his case to the European Court of Human Rights, although the UK government has not undertaken to suspend his deportation pending another hearing. His supporters have continued a vigil outside the Church of the Ascension in Manchester throughout December and have appealed to others to join them.

Mr Mendis who has publicly supported the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka claims that he faces persecution and probable death if he is returned to the island. The British Refugee Council and Church and community leaders have called on the Home Secretary, Mr Douglas Hurd, to allow Mr Mendis to remain in Britain on humanitarian grounds.