

THE NATIONS

Premadasa was killed, Prime Minister Dingiri Banda Wijetunge was sworn in as acting president.

Under the 1978 Constitution drawn up by Premadasa's predecessor J.R. Jayewardene, the legislature must elect a president from Parliament within a month. As of May 5 the 71-year-old mild-mannered Wijetunge was the only candidate. That the opposition chose not to contest showed the Parliament's resolve to restore calm. Another incentive: to head off a violent power struggle within the ruling party.

Police were quick to blame the Tamil Tiger separatists for both assassinations. But many people suspected the president's men killed Athulathmudali, and those same people were ready to believe Athulathmudali's followers murdered the president in revenge. "We have seen these very strong leaders acting like dictators and doing anything they want to their opponents," says schoolteacher Asoka Perera. "Wijetunge will be different and will bring some decency back."

Despite the political instability, an eerie calm settled over the island. An era was closing. Premadasa had presided over one of the most violent periods in the country's 2,500-year history. In him was the key to understanding everything that was good and evil about contemporary Sri Lanka. Anyone who looked could find equal measures of both in the man. But in the end, it was the dark side that won out. "The whole nation was angry," says a longtime political analyst. "We needed someone to focus our anger and hatred on. Premadasa had to die."

Poet, author and visionary, Premadasa



Dominic Sansoni

Athulathmudali: Another unsolved murder

believed in all things mystical. A vain man, his black hair dye would often drip down his face in the hot sun. A champion of the free market, he thought he could provide everyone with a home, an education and a chance to rise, as he did, above the caste system that dominates Sri Lanka. Paranoid and ruthless, he would stop at nothing to achieve his dream. "He wanted to see an economically-strong Sri Lanka," says his old friend Minister of Justice Shahul Haméed, "where the common man was given a share of the cake."

For many, the dream turned to a nightmare. When his death was announced, hundreds across the country lit firecrackers in celebration. Still, some wept. Thousands of mourners filed past his casket at his house on Sucharita Road. It was fitting that his body was taken there first rather than to the elegant Presidential House, where his higher-caste wife, Hema, lived without him.

Until late in his career, he tried to suppress any mention of his *Pudá* caste — designated for village laundrymen — which is near the bottom of some 60 Sinhalese castes. When he first became president, journalists were warned that anyone who named his caste would be "out of the country in 24 hours." He liked to compare himself to the great Dutugemunu, the ancient Sinhalese ruler who killed the Tamil king Elara. But only at his house in Kehelwaite, one of Colombo's oldest and poorest neighbourhoods, could he be himself. "His heart was [there]," says a long-time friend. "These were his people."

In Premadasa's youth the neighbourhood was a mix of Muslim and Tamil traders and a few Sinhalese working people. Though still poor today, it is well-lit and flush with government housing. School attendance is high and crime is low. Premadasa expanded his father's small house and lived there alone with his servants and valet. His door was always open to visitors, the house a monument to himself even while he was alive. In one room

were glass cases of memorabilia recording his triumphs. In a corner was a life-size model of his father and mother standing next to a rickshaw driver, with a likeness of young Premadasa in the seat. The people of Kehelwatte never deserted him, and it was they who were first in line to file past his casket displayed in a renovated rickshaw shed outside the house.

Within the sleazy lanes of sheds and shacks of his youth, double-cross was an art and scams a way of life. He learned both, and with brilliant organising skills tried to use them for good. He learned to speak Tamil fluently, Sri Lanka's only leader to ever do so. At 15 he started the Sucharita Movement, a self-help program to educate the slum's children. His father, a rickshaw owner turned businessman, saved enough to send him to an uptown Roman Catholic school, St. Joseph's College.

After he graduated he caught the eye of strongman labour leader A.E. Goonesinghe. He was one of the first politicians to use hit squads. Under his tutelage, Premadasa joined the Ceylon Labour Party and won a seat as municipal councillor. The Morris Minor sedan given to him at the time by his supporters still sits lovingly restored in a glass case at his house. In 1956 he joined the United National Party and helped President J.R. Jayewardene reorganise the party after it was trounced in the 1950s. Together they used communalism to win back support. Premadasa, no racist but a gifted orator, later regretted his fiery anti-Tamil speeches.

Early in his career Premadasa was befriended by several powerful businessmen. One was S. Rajendram, the Tamil founder of the Maharaja Organisation, today one of the country's richest groups. Another was Sinhalese land developer A.K. Dharmadasa. Both prospered under the UNP's economic liberalisation program. More recently Dharmadasa and Maharaja's son Killi became known in business circles as "the forces." They had access to Premadasa's close confidant, Secretary of Finance R. Paskaralingam, a Tamil who was considered the second most powerful man in the country.

It was Paskaralingam who engineered Premadasa's economic liberalisation program. He converted the president into a devoted free-market reformer. Their plan was to turn the country into South Asia's "Singapore." They chose to follow the well-tested East Asian model of export-led expansion with high growth rates and high inflation.

Although Jayewardene had begun to break the ruling class's hold on capital, Premadasa took it further than anyone thought possible. He flung open the stock market to foreign investors, slashed taxes



Dexter Cruz

Mothers of missing sons: As many as 30,000 people were killed in one year

and sold off 42 state corporations. The market turnover soared from \$50,000 a day in late 1989 to roughly half a million this year, and GDP growth leapt to almost 5%.

For Premadasa, it was a chance to redistribute wealth through trickle-down economics. A sure way for a businessman to please the president was to contribute to his "Janasayiya" welfare program, which gave the poor cheap access to credit and start-up funds for business. But in the economic free-for-all, capital went in every direction — including to his political opponents — and Premadasa began to back off. "The wrong people started to get rich," says a Colombo banker.

As the rich got richer, the poor Premadasa had tried to help kept getting poorer. With two insurrections — the

Tamils in the north and the Sinhalese Marxist JVPs in the south — and massive public spending, inflation ran at 20% throughout his presidency. The rural people watched contractors come from the city to make millions on construction projects. The gap between the rich and the poor, one of the world's largest before Premadasa became president, grew wider. "He tried to reach the invisible people in the country," says Hameed. "But there wasn't enough time. There can be a debate whether the medium he applied was the best."

When Premadasa became president in December 1988 he inherited a nightmare. Some 50,000 Indian troops occupied the northern third of the country, allowed in by Jayewardene in July 1987 to enforce the Indo-Lankan accord. In the south, a growing number of government hit squads roamed the streets. There JVP extremists had begun to rearm themselves and stage daylight raids on military camps. They had launched a full-scale revolution in April 1970, and were on their way to a second one. They gained massive support when their prediction came true that the "fifth column" of India would invade the island.

As a presidential candidate, Premadasa had pledged he would demand that the Indians leave the day he was elected. He did, but Rajiv Gandhi refused, and the JVP gained more support among the rural poor. Premadasa offered the JVP peace and backed it up by granting amnesty to 1,800 suspects. He also lifted the harsh Emergency Laws. That only helped the extremists, and by July 1989 they had killed some 3,000 civilians and hundreds of UNP supporters. Their campaign of terror, backed by nationwide strikes, brought the country to a standstill.



Dominic Sansoni

On guard: Two insurrections

Premadasa reimposed the emergency laws. Security forces could shoot suspected JVP members and sympathisers on sight, and dispose of their bodies without an inquest. In the first week of July alone, police tortured and killed some 5,000 people and left their corpses in towns throughout the south. UNP politicians used the emergency rule to take out political opponents, while Premadasa turned a blind eye. Some say he gave the orders.

One such case was the murder of journalist Richard de Zoysa. Police suspected de Zoysa had friends among the JVP students at Colombo University, the movement's urban base. On the night of Feb. 18, 1990, Ronnie Gunasinghe, a senior superintendent for police and a confidant of Premadasa, was having drinks with Deputy Defence Minister Ranjan Wijeratne. At one point, says a senior police officer, Wijeratne called Premadasa and told him of a plan to pick up the journalist. The next day de Zoysa's tortured body was found floating off a beach south of Colombo. Wijeratne was killed in a car bomb explosion in March 1991. Gunasinghe died with Premadasa in the explosion last week.

By February 1990 the carnage was over and Premadasa had won the war in the south. But Indian troops were still entrenched in the north, bogged down in a fight with Tamil Tigers. Premadasa, however, had secured a ceasefire with the Tigers. According to presidential adviser Doyan Jayatilaka, Premadasa ordered the Sri Lankan Air Force to evacuate to safety the wife and daughter of the Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran from their jungle hideout. He then ordered the military to deliver heavy arms to the Tigers to use against the Indians and rival Tamil groups.

In thirteen months of talks in Colombo, Premadasa offered the guerrillas more than any other Sinhalese leader had. The Tigers used the time to regroup, while the Sri Lankan army was confined to barracks. In June 1990, four months after the Indian troops withdrew, the Tigers accused the president of "saying one thing and doing another." War broke out again, and Premadasa was blamed. "Every time one of my men gets his leg blown off," said an army captain in 1990, "I think of our president."

Premadasa's biggest political blow came from one of his cabinet minis-



Jaffna church ruins: A ten-year war

Higher Education Minister Athulathmudali convinced some 47 ruling party MPs to sign an impeachment petition against the president. Athulathmudali had garnered more votes than anyone else in the 1989 general elections, and many had thought he would be selected prime minister. The group accused the president of numerous abuses of power, including wire-tapping, harassment of opponents and arming the guerrillas. "The president was in shock," says a loyal minister.

Premadasa broke the back of the impeachment, allegedly by bribing MPs. Afterwards his paranoia increased. Athulathmudali and another minister, Gamini Dissanayake, were forced out of the ruling party and formed the Democratic United National Front. Within months it had more

than 500,000 members. They held rally after rally, denouncing the president to crowds of 50,000 or more. They were expected to win handsomely in the seven provincial council elections May 17.

The councils, a part of the Indo-Lanka accord, were designed to give autonomous government to the Tamils. But the Northeast Council was abolished after the war with the Tigers broke out again, leaving only those in the south. If Athulathmudali had won the post of chief minister in the Western Provincial Council, he could have had more power in Colombo than the president.

The political rivalry between Premadasa and Athulathmudali led to a media war between the state-owned TV, radio, and newspapers and the opposition-owned press. UNP thugs openly attacked journalists who covered opposition rallies. In August 1992 they stabbed a cartoonist who had lampooned the president. Again, Premadasa was blamed for the violence. Opposition leaders also accused him of ordering the death of Gen. Denzil Kobbekaduwa, who died in a bomb explosion in Jaffna last year along with most of the northern command. Kobbekaduwa had sided with the opposition. When Athulathmudali was shot, many pointed to the president's men.

Who killed Premadasa? Jayatilaka and the police say the Tigers did it. "He generated hope to the Tamil community," says the presidential adviser. "The Tigers had to kill him." They are clearly the prime suspects. But according to Justice Minister Hameed, "it is still not clear who was responsible beyond a shadow of a doubt." By the end, there were a lot of people who hated him enough to kill him.

In his last speech just days before he died, Premadasa pleaded for mercy. "You can assassinate me," he said, "but don't assassinate my character. I am not a murderer. They accuse me, but they have no proof." People made their own judgements. Said one embittered oppositionist regarding Premadasa's murder: "We are Buddhists. We believe that you have to suffer the consequences of your crimes, either in this life or another one." Unfortunately, in Premadasa's case the whole nation would have to pay the price.

Tamil Tigers: The police were quick to blame them for both murders

