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VOTING FOR PEACE

SRI LANKANS DEFY DEATH THREATS TO ELECT A NEW PRESIDENT AFTER FIVE YEARS OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE

In a defiant show of courage, more than five million Sri Lankans streamed to polling booths last week to cast their ballots in the country's presidential elections. They voted despite a powerful disincantive: Marxist radicals had vowed to kill voters and polling officials. Sri Lankans were well aware that the threats were not idle. In the months leading up to the election, corpses lay strewn along roadsides in southern Sri Lanka—many of them mutilated, naked and blindfolded, with hands tied behind their backs. None of the candidates seemed to offer any real hope of stopping the carnage. But in a choice between two veteran politicians with similar platforms, voters selected Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, 64, a member of the nation's Sinhalese majority who was born a child of poverty and rose through the ranks of labor to head the ruling United National Party. "The ballots of the people have triumphed over the bullets of brutality," Premadasa told a nationwide television audience after the results were announced. "The politics of terror has no place in the temple of democracy."

Despite Premadasa's pledge to "restore law and order," most Sri Lankans seemed to expect no immediate relief from the violence. Over the past five years, violence has become ingrained in the daily life of the once idyllic island nation in the Indian Ocean. In the north, the largely Hindu Tamil minority has struggled for independence from the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. And when the government of 82-year-old President Junius Jayewardene—who formally steps down on Jan. 2 after 11 years in power—made concessions to the Tamils and invited Indian peacekeeping forces to northern Sri Lanka last year, it prompted bloody reprisals from radical nationalist and Marxist Sinhalese groups in the south. During the election campaign, Premadasa—as well as the main



Women weep over the body of a relative: violence ingrained in daily life

opposition candidate, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, also a Sinhalese, of the centre-left Freedom Party—had promised to expel the Indians, bring peace to Sri Lanka and improve conditions for the poor. But it remained unclear how any of those goals could be achieved. "I know every leader promises you the moon," said Wilfred Marten, a carpenter, after voting near

Colombo. "At least let somebody bring us peace."

Even while Premadasa's supporters celebrated his victory in the streets, Bandaranaike charged that state-sponsored groups had harassed her supporters in the run-up to the election and had cheated during the election itself. Analysts of constituency results also said

that the death threats by leftist Sinhalese radicals hurt Bandaranaike more than Premadasa. She refused to accept the results—50.4 per cent for Premadasa, 44.9 per cent for her and the remainder to a leftist candidate—and said she would petition the Supreme Court to overturn the results.

Although 55 per cent of the roughly nine million eligible voters went to the polls, the turnout was low by the standards of Sri Lanka, where 80 per cent of the electorate usually casts a ballot. In some areas in the south where the violence has been most intense, the turnout was below 10 per cent. "In a few booths there was one, sometimes only two voters," said Percy Abeyasinghe, polling officer in the southern district of Galle. Other voters were reassured by some 40,000 policemen, backed up by army and paramilitary forces, patrolling the streets. "Security was good; that's why people came out and voted," said an elections officer in Hambantota in the south. But it was good only in Sri Lankan terms: 18 civilians and three members of security forces were killed on election day, while five Indian troops were injured in an ambush by Tamil rebels.

The cycle of bloodshed can be traced to long-standing tensions between the Sinhalese, who comprise three-quarters of Sri Lanka's population, and the Tamils, who make up 18 per cent of the people and live primarily in the north and east. The breaking point came in 1983, when a group called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—which had carried out several political assassinations to further its demands for Tamil independence—ambushed an army convoy, killing 13 government soldiers. The ambush sparked widespread retaliation, as gangs of Sinhalese youths massacred Tamils and burned their homes, leaving more than 1,000 dead and 100,000 homeless. Reprisals followed: since 1983, more than 8,500 people have been killed.

The terror campaign by Tamil separatists prompted Jayewardene to sign the Indo-Sri Lankan accord in July, 1987. The agreement granted the Tamils a measure of local autonomy and brought Indian peacekeeping troops to northern Sri Lanka. But the Tamil Tigers refused to surrender their arms to Indian troops, and the Indians have boosted their troop strength to more than 50,000 today from less than 6,000 initially.

The agreement was even less popular among the Sinhalese, who have long felt threatened by the presence of 55 million Tamils in India just a few miles northwest of Sri Lanka across the Palk Strait. The Sinhalese plainly resented the concessions to the Tamils and

they maintained that the Indian troops in Sri Lanka represented a threat to national sovereignty. As a result, the Marxist and fiercely nationalist People's Liberation Front, which was accused of helping to instigate the 1983 violence against the Tamils, has re-emerged as a powerful and bloody force in the south, along with its ally, the militant People's Patriotic Movement. Since the accord, the Sinhalese terrorists have been accused of killing more than 600 members and supporters of the ruling United National Party.

Premadasa, who was prime minister when Jayewardene signed the Indo-Sri Lankan accord, openly opposed the pact. But he may have difficulty meeting his campaign promise to abrogate the deal. Without the Indians, observers say, Premadasa may not be able to control the Tamils. And there is no guarantee that the Indians will leave if he expels them: the Indian high commissioner in Sri Lanka has indicated that his country will not accept a unilateral order from Colombo.

Premadasa is the first Sri Lankan leader from outside the island's high-caste elite and he campaigned as "a man of the people." He promised to fight poverty in a country where the annual per capita income is equivalent to \$430. But while he vowed to give \$90 a month to the country's poorest families for the next two years, he did not explain how he would pay for the hand-out. In general, he is expected to follow his predecessor's liberal, free-market economic policies. Bandaranaike also had focused her campaign on peace and poverty. But she suffered from the voters'



MILADINOVIC/EPHRA

Premadasa: no place for the politics of brute terror

long memories: she has twice served as prime minister—from 1960 to 1966 and again from 1970 to 1977—and her strict import restrictions led to shortages of some consumer goods.

The U.S. government congratulated Sri Lankans for having the courage to vote despite the threats from Sinhalese radicals. And in Ottawa, a spokesman for the department of external affairs said that "Canada is encouraged that the people of Sri Lanka had the opportunity to go to the polls to elect their new president." Sri Lankans, meanwhile, expressed hope that, for all the violence wracking their country, their courage would eventually make a difference. "This may be the last time I have a chance to vote," said 85-year-old Bisomeneka, a blind, feeble woman helped from the polling booth by her grandson. "I hope anybody who wins will stop the killing and there will be peace."

MARY NEMETH with RITA SEBASTIAN in Colombo