

3 killed as Sri Lankans go to polls in contest of political widows.
(1994, November 10). *The Gazette*.

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MOLLY MOORE
WASHINGTON POST

NITTAMBUWA, Sri Lanka – Sri Lankans cast their ballots for president yesterday amid tight police security in a race between two political widows that was shattered by the assassination of the opposition candidate two weeks ago.

The government dispatched thousands of police and troops to trouble-prone areas as vote-counting began late last night. Final results, which will give the country its first female president, are not expected until today.

Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, 49, whose father and husband were killed by assassins and who led the People's Alliance Party to victory in this fall's parliamentary elections after 17 years in political exile, was favored to win the vote for president of this violence-plagued island nation off the southeastern coast of India.

Her chief opponent was Srimal

Dissanayake, 51, wife of opposition leader Gamini Dissanayake, who was assassinated by a suspected suicide bomber two weeks before yesterday's election. The United National Party candidate was killed so close to the election that ballots listed his name as the candidate.

Three people were killed in election-day violence and two more died in hospitals as a result of politically motivated fights Tuesday, officials said.

Voter turnout was considered low by Sri Lankan standards, with an estimated 65 per cent of the country's 11 million voters casting ballots. The turnout in the August parliamentary elections was 82 per cent.

Kumaratunga's mother became the world's first elected female prime minister in 1960 after Kumaratunga's father was murdered by a Buddhist monk. Kumaratunga's husband was killed in 1988 by militants.

In a country ravaged by 11 years of civil war between government

forces and militant ethnic Tamil separatists, this year's campaign turned particularly traumatic in its closing weeks. On the same day that Kumaratunga had scheduled a second round of peace negotiations with the leaders of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, her chief opponent was killed when a suicide bomber set off an explosion at a political rally, killing the candidate and 53 others, including many of the key leaders of his party.

The Tamil Tigers were widely blamed for Gamini Dissanayake's death. But Kumaratunga – who has based much of her campaign on promises to try to negotiate peace with the separatist Tamils and has courted the minority Tamil population to help her win election – has avoided implicating them in the assassination.

Ethnic Tamils, mainly Hindus, make up about 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's population of 17 million. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese, most of them Buddhist.