

Sri Lankan president faces daunting task. (1994, November 11). *The Hongkong Standard*.

EDITORIAL COMMENT: The
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A SMALL island nation yester day sent a salutary message to a world increasingly racked by ethnic conflicts and racial tensions. That message is unequivocal and unambiguous. It was the total rejection of ethnic politics, for long the happy hunting ground of Sri Lankan politicians of all hues and the ruin of that multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. In a vote that exemplifies the maturity of the Sri Lanka voter, the electorate rejected the opposition United National Party's (UNP) implied racism and elected current Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga as the country's first woman president by an unprecedented majority. In a desperate move following the assassination of its presidential candidate and opposition leader, the UNP nominated his widow in the hope of winning public sympathy and the election. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with that. What boomeranged was the opposition's attempt to link the assassination of its candidate, doubtless by the minority Tamil rebel group, the Tigers, with Mrs Kumaratunga who had initiated peace talks with the Tigers shortly after becoming prime minister in August. While

most Sri Lankans detest the ruthlessness and indiscriminate killings of the Tigers demanding independence, they desperately long for a solution to this problem that has divided society and drained the economy. Mrs Kumaratunga was seen as the only political leader today who has the courage to cross the racial divide and resolve this festering issue. While Sri Lanka has now given her the mandate to pursue her efforts at conflict resolution, she must not let sentiment and the immature advice of her close associates and cronies replace wiser counsel. The assassination of opposition leader Gamini Dissanayake in which more than 50 others died, should serve as a reminder to her that she is dealing with a highly motivated and disciplined but ruthless opponent who has matched wits with the best of negotiators. But what comes best to the Tamil Tigers is militarism and given the slightest opportunity they will engage in what they know, as a negotiating weapon as well as a means of eliminating opposing leaders. The new president would need to remember that while the Sri Lankan voter has given her a mandate to negotiate an end to the bloody war, it is not a blank cheque to engage in recklessness. That would be disastrous for her and for the country.