

endorsed the accord." If there is only a partial withdrawal it will strengthen Premadasa's position in dealing with the JVP in the south.

The major confrontation will arise when Premadasa tries to push his idea of bifurcating the east from the north. By conducting the provincial elections in the north-east and installing a chief minister Jayewardene had almost completed the merger, barring the referendum which is likely to be held by the end of the year. But Premadasa has been silent on these

vital issues. Explained Athulathmudali: "His tremendous patriotism has been totally misconceived as anti-Indian. This perception is likely to change soon because he is not anti-Indian."

But at the moment his eyes are set on the parliamentary elections which are due in February. And on the outcome of these elections will depend not only his credibility but also his ability to take

tough decisions. He has already taken steps which indicate that he is not likely to carry on with the Jayewardene legacy. In fact, he even opted for a dialogue with the JVP against the wishes of the outgoing President. Says Dissanayake: "Premadasa is unlikely to continue the Jayewardene legacy. These legacies are good for developed countries only. In a developing country like ours things change very fast." But from all indications it is going to be a tight-rope walk for the new ruler.

—PRABHU CHAWLA in Colombo

RANASINGHE PREMADASA

A Shrewd Operator

HIS transformation was dramatic. It seemed as if the man changed visibly the minute Sri Lanka's Chief Election Commissioner declared him the winner. When 64-year-old Ranasinghe Premadasa, the newly-elected President rose to deliver his acceptance speech in the capital's Town Hall, his arrogance and aggressiveness were replaced with humility and reconciliation. The dark-complexioned oily-haired Premadasa was no hawk out to settle scores with his opponents. And at the end of his carefully-worded seven-minute speech, Premadasa emerged as a politician who was trying to find a new role for himself in embattled Sri Lanka—the role of a mediator.

Said the President-elect: "I will protect our constitution. I will eradicate fear and suspicion. I will restore law and order. I will serve all people alike without fear and favour." He stretched out a hand of friendship to those whom he had a few days earlier vowed to liquidate. Said a senior diplomat: "Since he has made it to the top his attempt will be to consolidate his position. He is capable of carrying the majority with him."

Premadasa's rise has been meteoric. For the first time in the island's 2500-year history a person from the lower Hinna caste had made it to the top. Until now, Goigamas, the landed elite, had ruled. Premadasa was born in a washerman's family and his mother used to sell cooked meat on the streets of Colombo. Premadasa was



Premadasa with Jayewardene

educated in a school run by a Buddhist monk. And at the age of 15 he joined a social movement *Suchiritha* (social consciousness amongst the low caste people).

He entered politics in 1960 when he was elected member of parliament on the United National Party (UNP) ticket. Eight years later he became minister for local government, a post which he held till 1970 when Sirimavo Bandaranaike defeated the UNP in parliamentary elections. Premadasa won his own seat and was made the leader of the Opposition in the House. And when Jayewardene was elected as President in 1977, he chose Premadasa as his prime minister a year later.

For the next decade he studied politics at close hand and honed his skills so fine that he earned the reputation of being the island's most crafty politician. After Jayewardene, that is. When Jayewardene found himself slipping during the last few crisis-ridden years, Premadasa distanced himself from his mentor and suc-

ceeded in creating an impression that he was not a party to, any of the mistakes of the president.

While maintaining a low profile, he concentrated on carving his own niche within the UNP and identified himself with the common worker and the middle level leadership. When the presidential election drew near he projected himself as the only person who could take on the challenge of Mrs Bandaranaike.

And to establish his Sinhala bona fides, he chose the anti-India line on the thorny ethnic issue. When Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi went to sign the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in July 1987, Premadasa not only refused to receive him at the airport, but stayed away from the signing ceremony. From then onwards he steadily attacked the accord and opposed the presence of Indian troops on the island.

Though his public posturings were anti-Tamil, he quietly opened a dialogue with Tamil and Muslim leaders. This was to serve him well in the future. He received the largest number of Tamil votes in the election though it earned him some hostility from the Sinhalese.

But his major asset has been his image of a decisive administrator. The successful implementation of his low income housing project during the last few years has also won him plaudits from the poor. Says Lalith Athulathmudali, Sri Lanka's minister for national security: "Premadasa has a lot on his side to prove the point that he is a doer and believes in action-oriented programmes." But this time round, both his instinct and decisiveness are on test.

—PRABHU CHAWLA