

ELECTIONS: COMMENTS FROM BRITISH PRESS

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunge has been portrayed as brave, charismatic, quick witted and possessing more finely loved instincts of courage in the English Press.

The prestigious London Times in an editorial dated August 19 says: "Sri Lanka needs a brave leader: in the daughter of the Bandaranaiques, it may at last find one."

The editorial goes on to say her father and mother have been both Prime Ministers of the country and she has inherited their complex political legacy.

The Editorial headlined "Another Bandaranaike" comment-

ing on resolving North-East ethnic question claims that Mrs. Kumaratunge faces a formidable task with the UNP approach to the Tamil question lacking both intelligence and conciliation.

"Encouragingly, she has declared her readiness for unconditional talks with leaders of the various separatist armies. That is the right approach. It may in fact, be the only approach.

The London Times of August 19, also gives her accolades saying, "Mrs. Kumaratunge brings intellectual weight to the primeministership. She impressed Western diplomats with her international outlook and gut feeling for politics.

She is a formidable speaker, over both the Alliance and the SLP, its dominant partner."

The British Independent of August 18, 1994 describes Premier Kumaratunge as a quick-witted woman who shied away from politics as long as she could. She was more charismatic than her mother and her fighting instincts are more finely-loved.

The London Financial Times of August 19, 1994 says of the future economic projections. "On balance, businessmen are willing to give Mrs. Kumaratunge benefit of the doubt although they may postpone big investment decisions for a few months.

Some executives even argue, the People's Alliance will prove good for business. They say that the corruption associated with the UNP was beginning to harm investment activity."

In its comments the London Times Editorial says:

"Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge is the new Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, confirming that for all their differences — some religious, some ethnic and some imagined — the people of South Asia share a predilection for dynastic politics. India has had its Nehrus and Gandhis,

and Pakistan its assortment of Bhuttos. Volatile Bangladesh, although a younger country than the others, has two dynasties vying for electoral favour. And as its recently-concluded elections confirm resoundingly, the island of Sri Lanka has its Bandaranaiques, the ultimate nuclear political family.

"Mrs. Kumaratunge's late father, Solomon, and mother, Sirimavo, have both been Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka (or Ceylon, as it was), and she has inherited their complex political legacy. Yet the greater the distance she puts between her government and the old methods and policies of her mother, in particular, the better the country will be for those who live there. Although nourished on the family's socialist nationalism, and therefore expected to prescribe it as the diet for Sri Lanka, Mrs. Kumaratunge sought in her campaign to reassure voters — and defuse some effective criticism from the ruling party — by promising "Thatcherism with a human face." She will do her countrymen a disservice if she fails to honour this commitment.

"Mrs. Kumaratunge's party, the People's Alliance, will need to tread delicately. Its majority in parliament is as thin as a hopper — the rice pancake that is the staple of the Sinhalese — compelling her to rely on the support of a group of small parties. Each will, naturally, demand a political price. But most inconveniently of all, the executive President, Dingiri Banda Wijetunga, belongs to the ruling — now defeated — United National Party (UNP). With a large and hostile UNP contingent in parliament, and saddled with a President who is unlikely to regard her ascent with enthusiasm, Mrs. Kumaratunge faces a frustrating administrative baptism. "Politically, that may



moderate her agenda. But the unhelpful situation in which she finds herself should focus attention on the pressing need for constitutional reform. Sri Lanka's executive presidency is a result of changes made in 1978 by Junius Jayewardene, leader of the UNP and a doughty opponent of Mrs. Kumaratunge's mother. The abandonment of the country's original constitutional design — the Westminster model — was a serious error. The concentration of power in the President's office was abused relentlessly by Ranasinghe Premadasa, Mr. Wijetunge's predecessor. A return to parliamentary democracy is necessary if Sri Lanka is to return to a truly democratic culture.

"Yet no amount of constitutional reform, nor firm commitment to a liberal economy, will restore to this embattled country its social equilibrium if a solution is not found to the Tamil crisis. The civil war in the north has poisoned Sri Lanka: it has spawned terror, death and destruction, reducing the economy almost to rubble and destroying the country's democratic conventions. The UNP, whose approach to the Tamil question lacks both intelligence and conciliation, has left Mrs. Kumaratunge a formidable task. Encouragingly, she has declared her readiness for unconditional talks with leaders of the various Tamil separatist armies. That is the right approach; it may, in fact, be the only approach. Sri Lanka needs a brave leader: in the daughter of the

Bandaranaiques it may at last have found one.

Excerpts from British Financial Times of August 19, 1994.

Economic policy-making presents Mrs. Kumaratunge with a particularly awkward challenge.

She has promised to follow the UNP government's pro-market policies, which have in the past five years brought the country fast growth in output, foreign trade and investment.

"But businessmen see three dangers. First, to satisfy her left-wing supporters Mrs. Kumaratunge may be tempted to make some gestures — such as imposing punitive duties on the import of luxuries. Next, even though the overall direction of policy will be pro-market, day-to-day decisions may not. For example, the government is considering the future of the over-manned state-owned tea industry. UNP, which introduced limited privatisation of the estates' management, was planning more radical reform and Mrs. Kumaratunge may be tempted to fudge the issue.

"Finally, Mrs. Kumaratunge could try to increase welfare spending. Her manifesto includes promises of big food hand-outs to the poor. However, she may not be as profligate as she sounds, as such pledges are routine in Sri Lankan campaigning.

"On balance, businessmen are willing to give Mrs. Kumaratunge the benefit of the doubt although they may postpone big investment decisions for a few months. Some executives even argue the People's Alliance will prove good for business. They say that the corruption associated with the UNP was beginning to harm investment activity.

"Moreover, they welcome Mrs. Kumaratunge's determination to end the civil war, in which Tamil Tiger separatist guerrillas are fighting for an independent homeland."