

After assassinations, Sri Lankans wondering if peace is possible.
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The killings of the island's president and its leading opposition politician are seen as a setback in the political system's effort to resolve ethnic violence through democratic means.

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MADRAS, India — With the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa on Saturday by a suicide bomber, just a week after the assassination of the country's leading opposition politician, Sri Lanka has once again stumbled in its search for political stability and ethnic peace.

Many Sri Lankans are now questioning whether these goals are attainable.

"It is, of course, one of the most serious political tragedies," said Neelan Tiruchelvam, a leading lawyer in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, "because in the span of one week, two of the most important political leaders in this country have been assassinated. This is a terrible setback to the political system's effort to resolve differences through democratic means."

While misty-eyed writers called it Serendip in 19th-century literature, the country's emerald forests, placid beaches and Buddhist traditions have long belied Sri Lanka's post-independence history of ethnic and political violence.

Ethnic rivalries between the island's dominant Sinhalese population and its Tamil minority have colored this country's politics and led to bloodshed for nearly four decades.

The Sinhalese, who are mostly Buddhists, make up about 75 per cent of the population of roughly 17 million; the Tamils, who are mostly Hindus, form about 18 per cent. The remaining 7 per cent of the population are predominantly Tamil-speaking Arab Muslims.

From the mid-1950s, when fervent Sinhalese nationalists demanded that the Sinhalese language be the sole national tongue, Sri Lanka has seen a steadily mounting antagonism between Tamils and Sinhalese, animosity