

Asiaweek Pictures

President and Hema Premadasa: News of his murder was greeted with tears by some, but celebration by others

THE NATIONS

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SRI LANKA

Rule by the Sword

An Assassination Brings to a Close an Era of Political Violence



On the day he died, 68-year-old President Ranainghe Premadasa woke up at 4 a.m., as he had through most of his 40-year political career. He did his yoga, and at 5:15 he read the newspapers. At 7:30 he called his public relations officer and asked him to collect the "facts and figures" that reflected his record since he became president in 1988. He would use it to address the ruling United National Party's annual rally on the Galle Face Green, on Colombo's ocean front. "I want to tell the people how I guided the nation," he said.

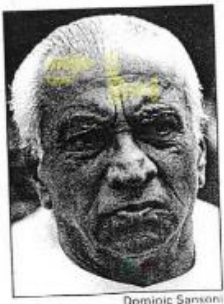
At 11:30 Premadasa, meticulous as ever, went to inspect the procession of party faithful he would lead to the green from Colombo's Sugadadasa Sports Stadium. Life-size posters of the president lined the route of the march. Security was

light, despite an army announcement that a Tamil Tiger hit squad had slipped into the capital. At Armour Street the president jumped out of his Range Rover to ask his supporters to line up to begin the procession. As he stood in a green UNP baseball cap waving his arms, a young man walked towards him pushing a bike. Premadasa's long-time valet Mohideen recognised him as "Babu," a Tamil who worked in Mohideen's grocery store near the president's home. The valet grabbed the handlebars and stopped him five metres short of the president.

The explosion could be heard two kilometres away at the house where Premadasa was born, grew up and still lived. The bomb, wired around the assassin's waist, was about

the size of a cassette recorder. It was powerful enough to instantly kill the president and sixteen others — most of his security contingent. Of the 38 people wounded, seven more would die. Premadasa was identified only by his wristwatch. "My clothes were splattered with blood and bits of flesh," a UNP supporter told the coroner, who was by now familiar with the effects of terrorist bombs.

In less than two weeks, assassins had struck down both the country's president and the only other man who could challenge him, opposition leader Lalith Athulathmudali. On April 23 a lone gunman had pumped six shots into the former defence minister's back as he addressed a campaign rally for May 17 provincial council polls. Shortly after



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