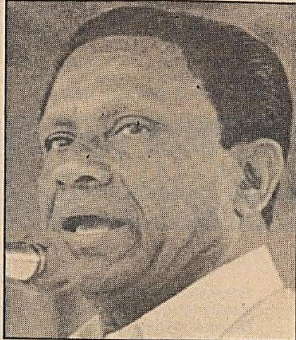


A humble boy's ascent to the top in Colombo. (1988, December 22). *The Ottawa citizen.*

PROFILE

A humble boy's ascent to the top in Colombo



Ranasinghe Premadasa
Uncertain mandate

By Barbara Crossette
The New York Times

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

Ranasinghe Premadasa, a poor boy who rose through the inner-city labor movement to the top of a political establishment dominated by aristocrats, was declared the president of Sri Lanka on Tuesday.

Premadasa, 64, is to be sworn in Jan. 2 at the ancient royal city of Kandy.

As gangs of supporters from Premadasa's United National Party took to the streets to set off fireworks Tuesday night, a curfew was imposed on the country to prevent post-election violence. Warfare among parties is common after elections in Sri Lanka.

The voting was marred by attacks assumed to have been mounted by leftist Sinhalese revolutionaries with a list

of political, social and ethnic grievances against the government of President J. R. Jayewardene, who at 82 says he is retiring from public life after half a century.

Jayewardene dissolved Parliament to prepare for a legislative election Feb. 15.

The next prime minister will be drawn from the parliamentary majority, in a system of shared executive power modeled on that of France.

Premadasa won Monday's presidential election by a very narrow margin above the 50 per cent-plus-one required by the Constitution. He received 50.4 per cent of the votes.

His main rival, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, a former prime minister and leader of the centre-left Sri Lanka Freedom Party, got 44.9 per cent of the vote, while Oswin Abeygunasekera, the candidate of a coalition of leftist

parties, won 4.6 per cent.

The turnout among the 9.37 million registered voters was just over 55 per cent. In the first direct presidential election, in 1982, 80 per cent of the electorate voted.

Ranasinghe Premadasa (pronounced RAH-nah-SING-zh PRAY-mah-DAH-sah) was born June 23, 1924, in a slum area of Colombo. His family came from one of the nation's lowest castes, the dhobis, or washermen.

As a boy, he was educated in Roman Catholic schools, though the family was Buddhist, like the majority of ethnic Sinhalese, who form about three-quarters of Sri Lanka's 16 million people.

He joined the Ceylon Labor Party as a youth and moved through that to a seat on Colombo's municipal council in 1955.

Premadasa, a charismatic speaker in his native Sinhalese, was elected to Parliament from the Colombo Central ward. He was named prime minister in 1978, after Jayewardene rewrote the Constitution and became president. He was elected directly in 1982 by a large popular margin.

As prime minister, Premadasa, who enjoys the company of entertainment-industry stars, enhanced his reputation among ordinary citizens by promoting house-building on a large scale.

But it is in foreign policy that Premadasa will find his most difficult challenges, by most accounts.

A man with no natural flair for international affairs, he has never disguised his animosity toward India. When the accord that brought Indian troops here was signed in 1987, Premadasa was absent from the ceremonies.

Sri Lanka: healing the wounds will not be an easy task

By Sheila Tefft
The Christian Science Monitor

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

Relieved that the violent ordeal of its presidential election is over, Sri Lanka faces new tests ahead uneasily.

Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa won a narrow victory and an uncertain mandate to deal with the political vendettas and ethnic rages besieging the small tropical island nation.

Many Sri Lankans admit it will be difficult to break out of the violence that has killed about 10,000 people in the last six years.

In the north and east, efforts to end a civil war between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority are stalemated. More than 50,000 Indian soldiers, who came to the island after Sri Lanka signed a 1987 peace accord with India, are bogged down fighting a weakened band of Tamil Tiger guerrillas. Indian troops were to disarm the guerrillas and oversee local elections.

A new provincial government dominated by the Tamils is caught up in the community's own internal rivalries and opposition among Sinhalese, who

oppose the limited autonomy given Tamils by the peace accord.

In the south, extremists have submerged social and political life in a wave of terror in which hundreds of supporters of the government and the peace accord have been assassinated.

That has triggered retaliation by government security forces and vigilantes, armed with extralegal emergency powers from the government.

"This is a deeply traumatic period for Sri Lanka, because the schisms are now so deep," says Neelan Tiruchelvam, a prominent Tamil and human rights activist. "Can a new leader really govern with the kind of violence and repression in this society?"

Many will be watching to see if the new government can arrest a slide toward disintegration in Sri Lanka.

Premadasa has described himself as a man of change, distancing himself from the controversial policies of retired President Junius Jayewardene. But Premadasa, whom many Sri Lankans link to what they view as the corrupt politics of the United National Party, is expected to have little room to manoeuvre. The new president will not have a

fully functioning government until after February elections for a new parliament.

Premadasa also pledged to renegotiate the Indian-Sri Lankan peace accord and to send Indian troops home. But New Delhi has made it clear that it will pull out in its own time and under its own terms.

The Tamil Tigers, battered by the Indian Army for more than a year, have lost much of their influence in the north and east. Following provincial council elections last month, a new Tamil administration, made up of members of other militant groups, has been installed to preside over a united province. The Indian Army is also arming militant Tamil security forces.

India, which harbored thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees during the civil war, maintains that it will not withdraw until Tamil rights have been secured. Although the tough tactics of the Indian Army have left many Tamils embittered, they favor a continued Indian presence as a buffer against the Sri Lankan military, which brutalized Tamils during the ethnic conflict.

Since the signing of the Sri Lankan accord, Tamils have won many of their demands, includ-

ing autonomy in the north and east, the official status of the Tamil language (along with Sinhalese), and the granting of citizenship to thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils who emigrated from India in the last century.

In grappling with one ethnic issue, however, the country has trapped itself in another. The emergence of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhalese nationalist group with left-wing roots, has been spearheaded by their anti-Indian sentiment, which has appealed to wounded Sinhalese feelings.

The new government will have to grapple with sensitive economic and social problems that have fueled the insurgency in the south: landlessness, overpopulation, failed economic development, and high unemployment among an educated youth.

"The Sinhalese from the villages feel their avenues of social mobility have been stopped," says a political analyst who asked not to be identified. "There can be no political stability without a reconciliation with the lower-middle-class boys and those from rural peasant families who are attracted to the JVP."