

Sri Lanka

Democracy's day of courage

FROM OUR SRI LANKA CORRESPONDENT

THERE cannot have been an election like it, certainly never in Sri Lanka. People risked their lives to vote, and 18 were shot dead, either queuing at the polls or returning from them. Gunmen attacked 20 polling stations. Fifty stayed closed because the staff were afraid to turn up. Yet there was a turnout of 55%, well down from the 80% or so of previous elections, but a brave effort by a democratic-minded people determined not to surrender to gun law.

Mr Ranasinghe Premadasa, the successful candidate, and thus Sri Lanka's next president, said as he cast his own vote on December 19th that this was a contest between the ballot and the bullet. "I am sure that the ballot will win." He was right. Mr Premadasa won a more personal battle. Although most commentators had predicted a close contest, the best guess was that 72-year-old Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, of the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom party, had the edge. The argument was that Sri Lankans wanted a change, if only to see whether an entirely new administration could end the country's communal troubles.

For ten years Mr Premadasa has been prime minister, under the outgoing president, Mr Junius Jayewardene. If that was a liability, a worse one appeared to be that he belonged to a low caste, that of the laundrymen. He grew up in a rundown area of Colombo, without the benefit of an expensive education provided by wealthy parents. Sri

Lanka's previous leaders, including Mrs Bandaranaike, a former prime minister, have been of high caste.

Nevertheless, the 66-year-old Mr Premadasa tipped the balance, winning 50.4% of the votes. Mrs Bandaranaike got 44.9%. The candidate of the left-wing People's party, Mr Ossie Abeygoonasekera, who survived two assassination attempts during the campaign, picked up the rest.

Mr Premadasa's intense campaigning and the United National party's superior organisation won him support across the country. He even did well in the southern rural districts where the gunmen of the People's Liberation Front, or JVP (for Janata Vimukthi Peramuna), are most active and did their deadly best to stop the voting.

All that was left for Mrs Bandaranaike was the anti-government vote that had built up over five years of unparalleled unrest in Sri Lanka, plus the support of white-collar suburbanites prepared to forgive her for the shortages that marred her government of 1970-77. It did not do. Mrs Bandaranaike suffered the ignominy of losing her hometown of Balangoda. She did not turn up for the formal results and left for the country in a sulk, saying the election was unfair.

One of the new president's first problems, when he takes over on January 2nd, will be to decide what to do about the JVP, the anti-government Sinhalese terror group

which is believed to have killed more than 600 people over the past year. In his victory speech, Mr Premadasa appealed to it to talk to him in a friendly fashion. He is perhaps the only major politician to have escaped criticism from the JVP. The Front appears to have made a distinction between the executive president, Mr Jayewardene, whom it has tried to kill, and Mr Premadasa, whom it has praised as a "patriotic leader".

The Front and the president-elect have a common cause in their anti-Indianism. Mr Premadasa was against last year's India-Sri Lanka agreement which brought 50,000 Indian troops to the north and east to disarm Tamil guerrillas seeking a separate state. The JVP calls them the invading forces of the Indian imperialists. Mr Premadasa promised to make the Indians go. This should please the Front, as should the dissolution of parliament announced on December 20th. The country's first parliamentary election in 12 years will be held on February 15th.

What will become of the accord with India? Mr Jayewardene says it is a fixture. The limited self-rule it promised to Tamils in the form of a provincial council for the north and east is now functioning. Only the Tigers, of all the separatist fighters, remain on the loose, but they now seem weak as kittens because of the presence of the Indians. Those close to Mr Premadasa say he may replace the accord with a "friendship treaty", whatever that means. He may then ask the Indians to start pulling out. This, he hopes, will keep the JVP quiet. Perhaps. But the real aim of its Marxist leaders may be to force a revolution in which it can come to power.

Mr Premadasa's promises of peace, an end to poverty, and the removal of the Indian forces without resurrecting the Tigers, will be hard to keep. Mr Jayewardene, still the "old fox" at 82, will be watching attentively as he shuffles slyly to the sidelines.



That's democracy, do or die