

## Murder and mystery in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO

IT HAS long been dangerous to be a top politician in South Asia, but in Sri Lanka political assassination has become almost routine. Since 1992, the island has seen the murders of a president, a defence minister, two leading opposition politicians and a clutch of armed-service chiefs, as well as hundreds of security guards and bystanders.

The latest victim of Sri Lanka's culture of political violence, Gamini Dissanayake, the opposition presidential candidate, died in a bomb blast at an election rally in the northern suburbs of Colombo on October 24th. Fifty-three other people died alongside him, among them two former cabinet ministers and the general secretary of Mr Dissanayake's United National Party (UNP).

The human carnage was bad enough, even for a country that has grown used to seeing pictures of bodies on its television screens. But the political repercussions of the blast may be even more serious. The presidential election will go ahead on November 9th, with Mr Dissanayake's politically inexperienced widow, Srima, taking over as the UNP candidate. But the recently elected government's hopes of negotiating a settlement of the island's 11-year ethnic war may have been mortally wounded.

There is no conclusive proof that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the movement that has been fighting the government for a separate state for Tamils in northern Sri Lanka, was responsible for the assassination. But, even though the Tigers have denied killing Mr Dissanayake, they are the chief suspects.

Unlike Mr Dissanayake's family, the People's Alliance government has so far avoided pointing the finger of blame at the Tigers; it has invested too much political credibility in the fledgling peace process to jump to damaging conclusions. But a second round of talks with the Tigers, due to have taken place hours after the assassination,

was postponed indefinitely. If it is proved that the Tigers were responsible, the prime minister, Chandrika Kumaratunga, will find it hard to resist the pressure from Sinhalese hardliners to abandon the talks and return to the battlefield.

That is a glaringly obvious prediction to anyone remotely familiar with the history of Sri Lanka's conflict. And that is why the assassination is so puzzling. Why should the Tigers choose to sabotage the peace process with a government that, in preliminary talks, had shown more sympathy towards the Tamils than its predecessors?

In the Sinhalese south there has always been scepticism about the ultimate intentions of the Tigers' leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. In the past, the Tigers have used "peace" talks as an opportunity to re-arm and regroup. But if this was again their intention, why not prolong the negotiations rather than risking an immediate resump-

tion of hostilities?

One possible answer is that the Tigers may have been so unnerved by the euphoric reception the government's peace delegation was given in Jaffna this month that it decided to scupper the talks before they acquired an impetus of their own. Another possibility is that the Tigers may consider the government of Mrs Kumaratunga to be so naive that it will continue to make concessions regardless of the Tigers' actions. The family of Mr Dissanayake offers a simpler explanation: the Tigers may just be pursuing their long-term goal of destabilising the Sri Lankan political system by assassinating its leaders one by one.

There is another possibility: that the Tigers are not to blame. The movement, with its unit of suicidal Black Tigers, has enough fanatics to carry out such an attack. But the police have not yet proved that a suicide bomber was involved. Even if they do, it should be noted that the island's predominantly Sinhalese population has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. In the murky world of Sri Lankan politics, it is not impossible that Mr Dissanayake was murdered by someone else.

Possible suspects include Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinists (who assassinated Mrs Kumaratunga's father in 1959), senior army officers (who tried to stage a military coup just before August's parliamentary elections), and anti-Tiger paramilitary groups. After three decades of frequently controversial political activity, Mr Dissanayake also had many enemies, some of them within the UNP itself.

In most countries, such possibilities would be dismissed as conspiracy theories. But in Sri Lanka the customs of civilised democratic life have yet to recover from a decade of violence and dislocation. Only five years ago its rivers and beaches were filled with mutilated corpses, victims of government-sponsored death squads unleashed to annihilate a Maoist-style insurrection in the Sinhalese south. Up to 60,000 people died in that conflict—twice the number of casualties in the ethnic war. Ranasinghe Premadasa, who presided over the death squads and was himself killed, was believed to have employed Tamil militants to get rid of his Sinha-



The ones that got in the way