

Missing money

COLOMBO

MILITARY coups, assassination plots and martial law: before its narrow victory in Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections last week, the People's Alliance accused the United National Party of planning to resort to each of those desperate ploys in order to prolong its 17-year rule. But so far the transfer of power has gone smoothly. Even the government's propaganda machinery has continued to function with hardly a hiccup. State-run newspapers which were filled with anti-Alliance diatribes during the campaign are now running colour photographs of Chandrika Kumaratunga, the new prime minister, and commenting on the "effortless smile" with which she "captivates the masses".

The transition has been eased by President D.B. Wijetunge's decision to avoid confrontation with his new administration, for the time being at least. His formidable panoply of constitutional powers theoretically enables him to hold any portfolio he chooses. But the only one he has insisted on keeping is defence. Even there, the president has been accommodating: he has allowed the deputy defence minister, Anuradha Ratwatte, to lift the economic blockade of the Jaffna peninsula, controlled by the Tamil Tigers, although he himself thought it should remain.

Lifting the blockade, and offering unconditional talks with the Tigers, are moves intended to show that the new government is determined to seek a peaceful solution to the civil war. But the power that the Tiger



Fast forward in Colombo

leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, has grown accustomed to wield in Jaffna may make him reluctant to accept anything less than total independence. Even negotiating with him is risky. The Tigers could use the accompanying ceasefire to rebuild their stocks of arms.

Unless Mrs Kumaratunga can bring a speedy end to the war, which costs more than \$1m a day, she will find it hard to implement the welfare measures promised in the Alliance's manifesto to cushion the

shock of its capitulation to free-market policies. Her discovery that 13 billion rupees (\$264m) appears to be missing from the Treasury may make her regret her pledge to reduce the price of bread and to provide dole for unemployed school-leavers.

The new government can count on a large fund of goodwill, particularly in the towns. Civil servants voted overwhelmingly for the Alliance, and the general public's disenchantment with the corruption and complacency of the previous regime was shown by the failure of more than a dozen ministers to hold their seats. The

Alliance's plans for a commission on bribery and corruption and for freeing the bureaucracy from political interference should help to consolidate its popular support.

But the government suffers badly from inexperience. Mrs Kumaratunga herself was not even a backbencher before becoming prime minister. Her pledge to keep the cabinet small and the administration clean will deprive her of a source of patronage. After so long in opposition, many Alliance supporters are keen to enjoy the fruits of office. With

the United National Party, under a new parliamentary leader, Gamini Dissanayake, ready to pounce on any mistakes and entice away her allies, Mrs Kumaratunga may find it a full-time job just to keep her own coalition under control.