

# Killings overshadow Sri Lankan elections

THE GUARDIAN

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — More than 9 million Sri Lankans go to the polls today in elections that could change the country's political face, still deeply scarred by the assassination of its two leading politicians.

The elections are for seven provincial councils, in which Lalith Athulathmudali, a former government minister who went into opposition, was strongly challenging the late president Ranasinghe Premadasa's ruling United National Party (UNP).

The deaths of the two leaders have profoundly shocked the country, giving pause to the cult of violence during the past 10 years.

## Many enemies

In the public mind, Athulathmudali's death is widely blamed on squads run by members of the UNP or government, over both of which Premadasa held firm sway. Many people still doubt officially inspired leaks of evidence that his death was the work of the Tamil Tigers. They prefer to believe one of his many enemies among the majority Sinhalese was responsible.

Athulathmudali's break with the government and UNP, to form the Democratic United National Front (DUNF), was largely the result of a personal confrontation with Premadasa.

Both he and his party deputy, former minister Gamini Disanayake, strongly objected to the UNP's bully-boy tactics — although they were once UNP leaders. There is much less to object to now that President D.B. Wijetunge, elected by Parliament to serve out Premadasa's term of office, is dismantling the squads.

Many people who might have voted for the charismatic Athulathmudali's party might well ask now what is the point of the DUNF's existence.

The other main challenger is the left-wing United Popular Front (known as PEP). The front's chief constituent is the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by the former prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, which boycotted the provincial elections five years ago.

## Boycotted last vote

The SLFP, however, is divided between right and left factions, led respectively by Bandaranaike's son Anura and her daughter Chandrika Kumaranatunge. The SLFP boycotted the last provincial elections and no one knows how much popular support it enjoys.

As for the UNP, Premadasa's death is both an advantage and a disadvantage. He had a strong following among the poor, but this was probably outweighed by disgust at the government's strong-arm tactics.

Most observers feel that no party will win outright in any province. This will force the three main contestants to negotiate coalitions.