

Ballot over bullet. (1989, January 15). *India today.*



Premadasa after his victory: serious challenges ahead



Premadasa supporters celebrate

Government without facing the elections. But President Jayewardene withstood its pressure tactics and decided to go ahead with the poll. He conceded one of the demands by dissolving the UNP-dominated Parliament a few months before its term was to expire.

In fact, the elections were held under the threat of the bullet and not a day passed without a dozen people being mowed down in various parts of the island. And as election fever mounted, extremist violence rather than personalities became the key election issue. Even sensitive issues like the Indo-Sri Lanka accord and the ethnic conflict, took a back seat.

And it was during this period that Bandaranaike committed the cardinal mistake of aligning with the JVP and the LTTE in the north. To begin with, her party joined the eight-party Democratic People's Front with the JVP as one of the partners. But later the JVP withdrew from the front and issued an appeal for a boycott of the elections. As if this was not enough, her son Anura Bandaranaike travelled through the jungles to meet the LTTE underground leaders barely a week before the elections.

Predictably, the UNP was quick to exploit her overtures to the extremists. Premadasa charged her with encouraging the forces of terror which reposed no faith in democracy. The people were warned that if she came back to power, it would mean the return of gun-toting militants.

As a result of this propaganda Premadasa polled almost 30 per cent of the votes in Jaffna and Trincomalee districts. Admitted National Security Minister Lalith Athulathmudali: "We got the total support of Indian Tamils and Muslims. Sinhala intellectuals and the upper-middle class didn't vote for us." Said a pro-SLEP bureaucrat: "Bandaranaike would have been a sure winner had she not left everything to her son who turned out to be a slow learner in Sri Lanka's complex politics."

But in his victory Premadasa faces a serious challenge. He inherits a totally shattered economy, a doomed tourist industry, the most explosive ethnic divide and a demoralised citizenry. His biggest test will be in his attitude towards the Indo-Sri Lanka accord.

Though most of the senior ministers believe that Premadasa will find it difficult to ask the IPKF to withdraw immediately, it is more likely that he may ask for its symbolic and partial withdrawal because, as Dissanayake puts it: "The election has

SRI LANKA

Ballot over Bullet

Premadasa's victory indicates the Sri Lankan people's desire for an end to the continuing violence in the island republic. It was also a rebuff to Sirimavo Bandaranaike's confrontationalist approach towards India. At one stroke the people delivered the message that they had had enough of both and wanted the country to be now steered towards the path of construction and progress. A report:

THE choice was between continuity and change, between Sinhala chauvinism and pragmatism, between reconciliation and confrontation and between peace and mayhem. Yet the majority of the 51 lakh voters, who chose Ranasinghe Premadasa as Sri Lanka's President for the next six years, failed to deliver a decisive verdict.

Though Premadasa defeated his nearest rival, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), by over 2.28 lakh votes, in reality he barely managed to poll more than 50 per cent votes, the mandatory requirement for the

winning presidential candidate. It was also the lowest voter turn-out (55.32 per cent) and victory margin in the last 35 years. Premadasa polled 50.43 per cent of the votes as against 44.9 per cent received by Bandaranaike. The third contender, Ossie Abeygunasekera of the Sri Lankan Mahajan Party, lagged far behind with only 4.63 per cent votes.

The mandate nevertheless was taken to be for continuation of the United National Party's (UNP) economic and social programmes. It was also a partial endorsement of Sinhala chauvinism. The new president had identified himself with

Sinhala sentiments against India's domination of the island's politics. But by rejecting Bandaranaike, the electorate clearly expressed its disapproval of her confrontationalist approach towards India and her association with extremists, both Tamils and Sinhalese.

Declared Premadasa after his election: "This is a clear victory of the ballot over bullets....The politics of terror has no place in the temple of democracy." Added Gamini Dissanayake, a minister in the present government: "The result is a clear defeat for the forces of Sinhala opportunism and militancy. The election was be-

lieved two political parties, the UNP and the SLFP, and by voting us back to power, the people have endorsed everything we stand for."

Though the contest was triangular, it eventually turned out to be a straight fight between Premadasa and Bandaranaike. Both were perceived as being pro-Sinhala and against Tamil insurgency. But their parties offered diametrically divergent economic, social and political programmes. While Premadasa vowed to replace the Indo-Sri Lanka accord with a more favourable friendship treaty, Bandaranaike promised the annulling of the accord and the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) within 24 hours of her taking over. Bandaranaike assured the people of an end to discord and a return to the path of peace and Premadasa sought a vote for "peace, discipline and prosperity".

The narrow victory margin, however, provided a handle to Bandaranaike to cast doubts over the fairness of the election and

reject the outcome as 'rigged'. Asserted the SLFP leader: "I have no doubt that I would have become President if the poll had been free and fair. I wish to state firmly that we do not accept the results of this presidential election." Added G.G. Ponnambalam, a leading advocate and SLFP supporter: "I can't believe that by voting for the UNP, the Tamils of the north have endorsed the bombing and the killings by the Sri Lankan Government. Obviously there is something fishy in the voting pattern."

Undoubtedly, it was one of the most violent and keenly fought elections in the island's history. Ever since the outgoing President announced the dates for the poll about four months ago, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—an ultra left extremist organisation—stepped up its killing spree in the southern parts of the island. Over 500 people were killed in less than four months preceding the elections. According to UNP sources, the aim of the JVP was to take over the



"I have no doubt that I would have become President if the poll had been free and fair. I do not accept the results."
SIRIMAVO BANDARANAIKE



