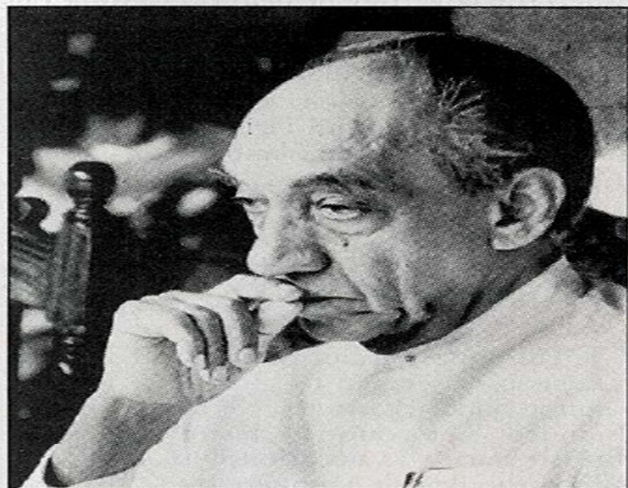


Sri Lanka

It still looks like no change

FROM OUR SRI LANKA CORRESPONDENT

WHATEVER chances Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike has of becoming Sri Lanka's next president have been somewhat improved by the defection to her party of Mr Ronnie de Mel. For ten years Mr de Mel was finance minister in the government of President Junius Jayewardene. He was a national asset, persuading aid donors and foreign investors to keep the cash flowing to his hard-up country. In January he fell out with Mr Jayewardene, calling his ruling United National party undemocratic. Through a series of constitutional wriggles, the govern-



Shall I stand?

ment has managed to avoid calling a parliamentary election for 11 years.

Mr de Mel announced last week that he was rejoining Mrs Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom party, which he had deserted in the mid-1970s. He will lose his parliamentary seat under rules brought in by the Jayewardene government, but should regain it at the general election due next August. He may not have to wait even that long. A presidential election will probably be held in December, and the parliamentary election may be brought forward to coincide with it.

Mrs Bandaranaike and Mr de Mel believe that Sri Lanka is itching for a change of government. This, though, is far from sure, particularly if Mr Jayewardene stands again as president. The constitution limits him to two terms, but it would take only some minor tinkering to let him run for a third. The smart money of business backers says he will. The old man—he is 81—prefers to keep everyone guessing.

He would be hard to beat. The island's whole political structure has been built

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around the man who helped to found the United National party in 1946, before independence from Britain. He led it to its biggest election victory in 1977, and took on the new executive presidency with its sweeping powers a few months later.

Admittedly, Mrs Bandaranaike is no lightweight. She was the world's first woman prime minister, leading two administrations in 1960-65 and 1970-77. A commission set up by Mr Jayewardene to inquire into alleged misdeeds of her previous administration banned her from standing in the presidential election of 1982. Though in her seventies, she remains hungry for power. How she would use the power is unclear.

In a way now grown familiar around the world, the socialist policies of her governments led to economic constriction and to shortages which swept her out of office. Her Freedom party had another setback in July when the government held on to three out of four seats in by-elections. She had hoped for a large protest vote by Sinhalesē who dislike the 50,000-strong Indian peacekeeping force brought into Sri Lanka last year to help subdue the Tamil Tiger guerrillas in the north and east of the island. The Tigers are at bay but not yet tamed. Even so, the India-Sri Lanka agreement no longer seems a handicap for the government. The parlous state of the economy, caused by five years of civil war and the consequent loss of tourist revenue and increase in defence spending, might have given the opposition an opening, but apparently did not.

This disappointment seems to have forced a rethink in the Freedom party. It had previously been offering portfolios in a future government to the anti-agreement-with-India Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), if the Front stopped killing pro-agreement politicians. Mrs Bandaranaike may now try to make a deal with Sri Lanka's third political force, the pro-agreement United Socialist Alliance, whose presidential nominee is Mrs Bandaranaike's daughter, Chandrika. Daughter is unlikely to challenge mother.

At a conference of Asian historians in Colombo President Jayewardene confessed: "No one knows how the people think. I have been in politics for the past 50 years and I am no better in this respect than when I started." The opposition's best hope is that the voters will suddenly turn fickle.