

Outsider becomes 'Great Dark Hope'

COLOMBO

ONLY a year ago, Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa was the "Bannu's ghost" of Sri Lankan politics. His own government waited until he was on an official trip abroad to drop the stunning news of the Indo-Lankan peace accord. Then, when Rajiv Gandhi got bonked over the head at the signing ceremony, that incident was largely overshadowed by Mr. Premadasa's glaring absence from the receiving line.

But the iconoclastic outsider is now at the centre of things. Indeed, he has suddenly become that centre. After President Junius Jayewardene's reluctant announcement last week that he will not seek re-election, the low-caste prime minister is the ruling party's candidate — the "Great Dark Hope" for peace in a blood-soaked paradise.

That certainly is not how Mr. Jayewardene planned it. According to the script, the wily octogenarian magician was to have pulled a rabbit or two from his hat by now. Tamil Tiger guerrillas were supposed to be tamed, disarmed and thoroughly on-side. A deal was perpetually in the works with the People's Liberation Front (JVP) to make the southern killers trade their guns for a small share of power.

"But neither of those have happened, and Jayewardene has just run out of time," explains one shrewd local analyst. "The way things stand, he couldn't beat Jack the Ripper at the polls right now. He can't win. He can't come close. There were no options left."

Except to place a new face atop the ruling United National Party. And, in local terms, Mr. Premadasa's smiling visage is considerably more than new. It is revolutionary.

The prime minister has never concealed his humble origins in Colombo's slums. He is of the "washer" caste, descended from a long line of dark-skinned men and women who earn their living by washing the clothes of their caste superiors.

His political background is equally humble. While Junius Jayewardene and the majority of Sri Lankan leaders are Oxford-educated lawyers and intellectuals, Mr. Premadasa is a labor union organizer who got his start in politics as a scrappy municipal councillor.

"It is pretty damn remarkable," one Western diplomat says of Mr. Premadasa's rise. "He isn't just the lowest-caste person in the entire Government,

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In SRI LANKA

he is the lowest caste by a very great margin. Out there in the street, that's all they know about him. Nobody talks about his positions on issues or his track record. They say: 'He's black. He's a washerman.'"

It is still uncertain whether that will be a boon or bane in the presidential elections expected late this year. Here, as elsewhere, the common man vastly outnumbers the elite from which past leaders have come. And the ruling UNP is already conjuring visions of a U.S.-styled "log cabin to White House" ascent.

But the caste issue could have the opposite effect. In the crunch, many Sri Lankans might not vote for a man so far below their own caste. Three thousand years of history carry a powerful undertow.

Still, the selection of Mr. Premadasa was not an experiment in social engineering. The UNP picked him for precisely those qualities that made him the party's pariah a year ago. The crumbling Indo-Lankan peace accord has become an albatross around the Jayewardene government's neck. Who better to cut it loose than the man who publicly snubbed Rajiv Gandhi?

"The UNP had a leader who staked his political career on the Indian accord," says the diplomatic analyst. "Now they've switched to the one man in the party who had the guts to openly oppose it. You can't make a bigger shift than that."

The turnabout will not inspire great joy in New Delhi, where Mr. Gandhi has bet much of his own prestige on the accord. He already has one "anti-Indian" foe in Sri Lankan opposition leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Now the ruling UNP has opted to set the dogs on him, too.

Mixed together with the presence here of 50,000 Indian troops and the continued intransigence of the Tamil Tigers, the situation has all the ingredients of a political Molotov cocktail.

It is too early to predict whether Ranasinghe Premadasa will light the fuse. But his climb to the top of Sri Lankan politics raises both great hopes and terrible dangers.