

Sri Lanka: toward chaos of unbelievable magnitude. (1993, May 4).  
*The Gazette.*

# Sri Lanka: toward chaos of unbelievable magnitude

**BRUCE MATTHEWS**  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Anyone who has ever driven a car in Sri Lanka will know the feeling of living in an environment where virtually no rules are applied. Buses, cars and motorcycles, too numerous for the capacity of the roads, hurtle around bullock carts and pedestrians, each seemingly bent on its own individual suicide mission.

It can be a frightening and dangerous experience, marked by a complete absence of civility. In some ways, this could be a metaphor for Sri Lankan society as a whole.

For more than a decade, Sri Lanka has been sliding toward social instability and grave political uncertainty. Now, in the space of one week, chaos of unbelievable magnitude is sweeping the country.

First there was the murder of leading opposition political figure Lalith Athulamudali, 54, by a lone gunman, and days later the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, 68, by a suicide bomber on May 1.

Their deaths in some ways mirror the manic temper of society. They are the mere tip of a wave of violence and bloodshed emanating from Sri Lanka that has included

thousands of service personnel, innocent civilians, Tamil Tigers and even Rajiv Gandhi.

Why has this tragedy engulfed what was formerly the dominion of Ceylon and one of the most prosperous and inviting parts of Asia? There are two key reasons. First, there was complete lack of political statesmanship on the part of the Sinhalese majority to give the minority Tamil population some kind of autonomy. This led directly to a 10-year civil war that still shows no signs of abating.

Second, the disastrous introduction of an executive-style presidency in 1977 quickly evolved into an authoritarian one-man rule no electorate could ever expect to remove through democratic means.

## Seen as venal dictator

This does not mean that Premadasa was inept. He had the political skill to at least keep the country functioning. And he, unlike other Asian leaders, often fearlessly appeared in public without much evident security.

However, his rumored involvement in the murder of anyone who stood in his way painted him as a venal dictator to some, and made him countless enemies.

His real power base was among the peas-

ants, the Tamil minority and the depressed elements of society. The urban middle and upper classes generally disliked the president as he took on regal airs and made endless efforts to show himself as a pious man.

The identity of Premadasa's assassin will likely never be known. Although there are celebrations all over the island at present because of Premadasa's death, there is still a chance some kind of retaliatory blood-bath may occur. There is also the possibility that the murder will be blamed on a Tamil, which could result in race riots. It is too soon to determine whether the army might intervene, but with the murder of their most politically attractive senior officer last August, no military figure of note is in a position to receive popular endorsement.

Meanwhile the somewhat lackluster prime minister, D.B. Wijetunge, 71, has assumed power until parliament elects a new president this week. The most likely candidate is Ranil Wickremesinghe, 44, the aristocratic leader of the house and minister of industries.

Coming as he does from a distinguished family, Wickremesinghe has the backing of many influential sectors of society. If Wickremesinghe takes on the presidency, he is likely to share power and consult and in-

volve parliament in the affairs of the country much more than Premadasa did.

But Wickremesinghe, or any other president appointed by the governing United National Party, may not long be in power. His mandate will be only to finish Premadasa's term, which has two years remaining.

Meanwhile, parliamentary elections are due next year. If they are free and fair, these may well see the end of UNP rule at the hands of a United Front opposition. A president whose party loses parliament would not likely in turn be able to win his own presidential election.

## Statesman of courage

There is much work to be done getting the country back into some semblance of order. With a change of presidents, political morale will undoubtedly improve. The horrendous communal and economic problems, however, demand a statesman of courage willing to take substantial political risks. It remains to be seen if the new leader is up to this task.

■ *Bruce Matthews teaches comparative religion at Acadia University, in Nova Scotia. He has just returned from Sri Lanka.*