

# Premadasa: the man and the myth

The history of Sri Lanka may record President R. Premadasa as one of the leaders most misunderstood by his own people. The announcement of his death was marked in Colombo and the provinces by an unconventional mixture — some by relief, firecrackers, milkrice, cocktails and others by genuine grief. At the May Day celebrations in Jaffna, when an LTTE leader announced that a suicide bomber had killed President Premadasa, there was a moment of shock followed by an applause and whistles.

The Premadasa era ended after 4 1/2 turbulent years on May Day 1993. Whether we like it or not, history cannot erase Mr. Premadasa's influence on the Sri Lankan people. Mr. Premadasa began to influence Sri Lanka's destiny first as Prime Minister (1978-1988) and then as President (1989-1993). It was marked with the Premadasa style of administration, where he vigilantly and at times harshly controlled his cabinet, the party and public officials. In many ways, he had to guide the nation with an iron fist inside a velvet glove. Perhaps, he was the only man who could have governed Sri Lanka when it was moving at crisis line after being confronted with two internal and an external threat.

Significant political events marked his 4 1/2 year rule: (1) de-induction of the IPKF, (2) negotiating with the LTTE, (3) annihilation of the ruthless JVP and (4) fighting a battle-hardened LTTE. Even though Mr. Premadasa had inherited a nation burdened with violence both in the north and the south, the public perception moulded by his opponents was that he created violence to remain in power. His rule, by misfortune, was associated with terror — this made his death a relief to many. Not only the Opposition but some within the United National Party also rejoiced. While his associates wept for having lost their power and position or through sincere grief, his enemies in certain areas in Greater Colombo and the provinces said, "We do not

## Point of View

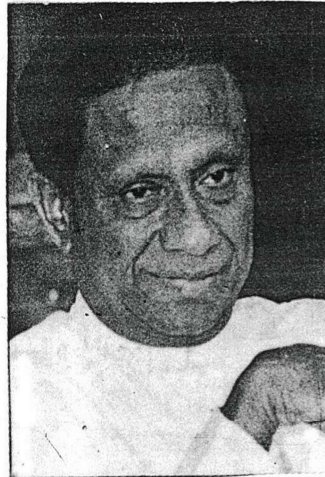
By Rohan Gunaratna

have to expect the death-knock on our door at midnight any more." Mr. Premadasa, a man with good intentions had fallen a victim of what he politically bequeathed and circumstances beyond his control.

In many ways, Mr. Premadasa was a complicated man. His behaviour was contradictory and complex. This was perhaps because he could never transcend his background. However much he tried, his past was a shadow unto him. His strengths and weaknesses have rarely been discussed publicly. He was a man who felt equally comfortable with the higher echelons as well as with the lower rungs of society. He was equally comfortable in communicating or being associated with either an intellectual or a thug. He had a gifted memory and an unusual sense of judgment. He grasped problems quickly; he wanted them resolved by hook or by crook. However, he saw that others in important positions followed the law, even if it was bad or outdated law.

### Prosperous economy

Any exceptions needed his personal blessings. To win the support of the Sri Lankan industrialist, he made provocative statements referring to the exploitation during the colonial era which hurt the foreign investor, but he knew that Sri Lanka would progress only under a market economy. But, infusing dynamism, he expanded the GCEC into the BOI to enhance foreign investment, and worked relentlessly towards achieving a prosperous economy. As Prime Minister, he travelled round the world but he restricted international travel for his cabinet, parliamentarians and officials. After the im-



Premadasa: was a populist, not an elitist

peachment, on the advice of a few close associates, some of these strange ways of dealing with his colleagues improved, but not totally.

He was a populist and not an elitist; his actions had a mass appeal. Even though de-induction of the IPKF was believed by many analysts to be a disaster, it pleased the common man. On the contrary his predecessor J.R. Jayewardene was an elitist. JRJ took decisions such as the referendum, the PTA and the Accord which were legal but were resented by most of the people. Mr.

Premadasa also tried to stamp out corruption. He kept very close tabs even on his ministers and close confidants, and reprimanded them often publicly, if it was necessary. However, to show the people that he was clean and just, Mr. Premadasa instituted committees and commissions against his associates, advisors and friends protecting only those who were privy to his personal weaknesses. His motive was obviously to preempt any allegation made against him or his government, gain public confidence and secure votes even at the cost of a friendship.

### Foreign currency

Mr. Premadasa created his era and while building that, he attempted to disgrace his predecessors' era. He detested competition and rivalry. He made it obvious he disliked Mr. Jayewardene. The feeling was mutual. He made life difficult for many and later fired many of Mr. Jayewardene's close colleagues including Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake. In a similar way, he craftily reprimanded several of Mr. Jayewardene's relatives — Dr. Hiran Jayewardene and Dr. R.P. Jayewardene and supporters including R. Bodhinagoda — forcing them to resign from their positions. When W.M.P.B. Menikdiwela's daughter was apprehended for carrying foreign currency abroad, he allegedly arranged for its detection to receive maximum publicity. The motive was obviously to ridicule Mr. Menikdiwela if not Menik's former master. He appointed a commission of inquiry into the MOSSAD affair where Ravi and Penny Jayewardene were questioned. He appointed a commission to inquire into the NGOs after he fell out with his best friend Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne. Where 40 per cent live below poverty line, these commissions were counter-productive and to a country like Sri Lanka an appalling waste of money.

Please turn to page 7...

## Premadasa the man...

Continued from page 6

Initially, while Mr. Premadasa tried to project that he was above petty politics and was a sort of a statesman. Soon, his habits caught up. He even used the parliament, such as his last address in parliament, to attack his opponents. He had little or no private life. He did not live for pleasure. Even to the best of his friends, except chit chatting, he was a very poor entertainer. What he enjoyed was work, and work from 4.00 a.m. to midnight. It is doubtful that Sri Lanka will ever produce a public figure who had such a high capacity to work — nearly 18 to 20 hours a day. He could never be blamed for inaction, inefficiency or complacency. He did not amass wealth like some of his colleagues. Without the slightest doubt he can be crowned the champion of the poor in the developing world. His thinking on poverty alleviation is today a model for the region. He was a clever organizer — unlike Mr. Jayewardene, he felt the pulse of the people, and as an orator he would appeal to the public many more times than Sri Lanka politicians living today.

Often the Sinhala chauvinists accused Mr. Premadasa of being close to Tamils. An anonymous leaflet, distributed recently alleged that Sri Lanka was ruled by three P's — Prema, Prabha and Paski. "It is not a secret that Mr. Paskaralingam was the closest to President Premadasa in many ways. Mr. Paskaralingam, an astute and an able man, controlled the Treasury. Some psychologists say Mr. Premadasa was close to the Tamils as he felt more comfortable and at ease with them. They question whether it was because he was so conscious of his caste and therefore could rarely trust a Sinhalese who are reputed for betraying their own kind."

While Mr. Premadasa expected others to be conventional, his style of rule was unconventional. Was it this that led him as alleged, to arm the LTTE? He also paid attention to detail. This quality was a reflection of the high degree of discipline he had instilled in himself and his hard working team. He personally lacked the broader vision needed to propel Sri Lanka into peace and prosperity. But he spent hours interacting with the public, resolving individual complaints from his mobile secretariat, unveiling clock towers and opening garment factories. His ministers too spent lot of time emulating him by opening various school buildings to public toilets, spending little time on formulating policy which the country desperately needed to meet the changing times. His ministers and close associates were terribly scared of him. None of them had the guts to tell him, "Sir, do not arm the LTTE. They will use those arms against us one day" or "Sir, do not chase the Indians

away as the LTTE may go back on their promise" or "Sir, do not attack the press". They only sang praises to him and had guts only to speak behind the President's back. Had they been open with him. Mr. Premadasa would have been a better President and would have served Sri Lanka much more usefully.

The main reason for Mr. Premadasa's decline in popularity, within and outside the party was his dictatorial ways, which earned him the nickname "One man show." From this stemmed the inability to take defeat, criticism and dissent. Mr. Premadasa's notoriety for relentlessly persecuting his opponents, particularly those who politically threatened him made a large section of the public allege that he may have been responsible for the killings of Upali Wijewardene, Ranjan Wijeratne, Denzil Kobbekaduwa and Lalith Athulathmudali. Today, it is believed that Mr. Wijewardene was killed while travelling in his private plane due to a mechanical failure. Mr. Wijeratne by a car bomb detonated by a Black Tiger identified as Prem, Lt. Gen. Kobbekaduwa and his colleagues by a mine laid by an LTTE reconnaissance team, and Lalith Athulathmudali by an LTTE gunman. Mr. Premadasa's stubborn attitude worsened the public perception of the man, and the opposition exploited these issues to the maximum.

He allowed his opponents to be harassed. Lalith Athulathmudali was attacked by state sponsored thugs on two occasions. His political meetings were sabotaged and electric power essential for lighting and the PA system was deliberately cut off and security and weapons issued to him were withdrawn. Further, the Tax department, the police, and other instruments of the State, were under pressure to nail Mr. Athulathmudali down. Under Mr. Premadasa, many of these institutions lost their independence. In addition to these, the State media were rigorously and repeatedly manipulated to attack the DUNF. It is this attitude of Mr. Premadasa which ultimately caused the public to blame him for the murder in which he apparently had no hand. The public subjected over a period of time to black, white and grey propaganda by the State controlled media were programmed to think that Lalith Athulathmudali who was the number one enemy of the UNP leadership was killed on the orders of Mr. Premadasa. It is interesting to note that the Premadasa era witnessed an increase in the alternate press — mostly tabloids. This was due to the loss of independence of the mainstream media which he controlled. Today, as the mainstream media is returning to its rightful place, the circulation of the tabloids may drop.