

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A commoner elected President

With 50.3% of the vote, UNP Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa has become the new President of Sri Lanka.

In the many ways the election of Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa as the next Sri Lankan President is a momentous event.

Belonging to a poor family and coming up the ranks, Premadasa, unlike his main opponent and earlier Sri Lankan leaders, is a man of the masses with a sound understanding of the common people.

At the United National Party (UNP) convention on Oct. 9, Premadasa outlined his immediate program which he described as a "new vision."

The three-point program consists of restoration of peace in Sri Lanka, the enforcement of discipline and the eradication of poverty.

Premadasa defeated Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leader and former prime minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike in a bitter campaign that took place against the backdrop of unprecedented violence in the six-year-old ethnic conflict that has convulsed the island.

Mrs. Bandaranaike has already challenged the election results, citing a number of irregularities, and announced in her characteristic style that she would not recognize the new President.

With this defeat, perhaps, the curtain has finally fallen on the doughty Mrs. Bandaranaike's political career. A descendant of the Kandiyani kings and belonging to the upper-caste Gogigamas, Mrs. Bandaranaike had all the elements to be the next President.

But her unabashed opportunism—such as trying to forge an alliance with the same Maoist-fascist Janatha Vi-

mukti Peramuna (JVP) who had tried to murder her in 1971, and kowtowing to the racist Sinhalese chauvinists—finally did her in.

Of late her virulent anti-India and anti-Tamil rhetoric had reached a peak, and an analysis of the poll result shows that she was rejected by those who believe more than demagoguery is required at this critical juncture of Sri Lanka's political history.

By contrast, Ranasinghe Premadasa is a commoners' President, who started his political career as a councillor of Colombo Municipality.

In spite of the fact that as prime minister in the Jayawardene government, Premadasa had often spoken out harshly against the Tamil movement, he received a significant number of votes in the Tamil-majority areas.

His stance against the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord—the stationing of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the northeastern part of Sri Lanka in particular—did not prevent him from securing his biggest majority in areas where the Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin and the Muslims are concentrated.

Interestingly, since Premadasa's election victory, the terrorist JVP has been quiet. The JVP had threatened to bring the administration to its knees and prevent holding of the presidential elections altogether.

More than 50 people were assassinated in the several days leading up to the Dec. 19 election, but the JVP clearly failed in its aim.

How long this calm will prevail is

anyone's guess.

In his victory speech, Premadasa appealed to the JVP to join the mainstream democratic process, and in conclusion warned: "You have another chance of doing so at the forthcoming parliamentary elections" set for February.

Those who know Premadasa well recognize that the warning is no empty threat: The President-elect can be as ruthless as the situation demands.

Ranasinghe Premadasa's immediate moves will be watched with great interest in India.

His earlier anti-accord stance makes India somewhat uneasy, but so far, if the first impressions are any indicator, Premadasa has acted wisely and with circumspection.

His first act as President was to quickly arrange the devolution of powers to the Provincial Councils, enabling the newly formed Tamil-governed North-Eastern Provincial Council—a crucial element in a political solution of the ethnic crisis—to begin functioning.

Following his electoral victory, Premadasa made it a point to honor the Indian High Commissioner as the first envoy to be received by the new President.

His meeting with the Indian envoy was reportedly "frank and cordial."

Besides the law and order situation, which the new President is expected to handle better than his predecessor, Premadasa's statement on the eradication of poverty is also significant.

He has said that the most important investment for Sri Lanka is to invest in its people: "There is no other investment that can be as fruitful as this," he stated.

Nearly six years of terrorism and fratricidal warfare have not only demoralized the population, but shattered the economy.