

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### A win for Jayewardene

*The provincial elections in Sri Lanka lay a basis for rebuilding the island's shattered polity.*

In a solid step forward for the process of restoring normalcy to Sri Lanka, elections were held April 28 for half of the eight provincial councils established as part of a plan to end the ethnic-based separatist insurgency that has wracked this island nation for more than five years.

The provincial councils, with a total of 437 members, are the institutional base for a new, federal set-up modeled in large part on that of India. Implementation of the plan is one aim of the Indo-Sri Lankan pact signed last July for cooperation in rebuilding the shattered Sri Lankan polity. Under the pact, four Indian army divisions are presently engaged in eliminating the remnants of the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces.

Rajiv Gandhi personally telephoned President Jayewardene on the occasion of the elections—all four in Sinhala-majority provinces in southern Sri Lanka where sentiment against the accord is thought to be high, and where the outlawed Sinhalese Maoist-terrorist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) organization had threatened to disrupt the polling.

Elections in three more Sinhala-majority provinces are set for June 9, by which time it is hoped that the Indian peacekeeping forces will have succeeded in stabilizing the northeast sufficiently to elect the provincial council there, too.

President Jayewardene, once criticized for failing to take political initiative in the ethnic crisis, pushed hard

for the elections, originally targeted for January, in spite of numerous hurdles. As he put it in an interview to the Indian daily *Hindu*, with elected provincial councils in place, the political momentum of the process of implementing the settlement could not be upset.

As it turned out, the JVP threat proved somewhat hollow, though an unprecedented security deployment protected the election. Voter turnout ranged, according to different accounts, from 58.9 to 70%.

Significantly, the ruling United National Party (UNP) won all four of the contests, with a total of 88 seats. The newly formed United Socialist Alliance (USA) was the major challenger, winning 64 seats. The Lanka Muslim Congress won three seats. USA, a combination of Trotskyist and pro-Moscow leftist parties, is also an outspoken proponent of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord.

The main national opposition party, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) of former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike—a vociferous opponent of the accord—boycotted the polls. The SLFP has insisted that national elections, due within a year, should be held first.

But Mrs. Bandaranaike's boycott stance, in her effort to court the JVP and wield Sinhala chauvinist sentiment to advantage against Jayewardene, may backfire. The April 28 round of elections established the USA as a dynamic new force, against both the SLFP's boycott call and the JVP's

disruption threats.

Meanwhile, Jayewardene has announced the lifting of the ban on the JVP, on the strength of an agreement under which the group will surrender its arms and forsake violence. The JVP has claimed credit for an assassination wave against supporters of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord, including a terrorist attack on the parliament and attempted assassination of Jayewardene last year.

But the ban had become a contentious issue even within the ruling party, with many arguing that, forced to contest in open political campaigning, the JVP's aura of strength would evaporate. In conceding to this line of thinking, Jayewardene has also taken away one of Mrs. Bandaranaike's weapons of opportunity.

As welcome and successful as it was, however, the April 28 election is just the beginning. The crucial test will come in the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces—joined temporarily, in deference to one of the Tamil demands, until normalcy has been restored and a referendum can be held on the issue in the province. There, the separatist leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has dug in its heels, refusing to lay down arms and endorse the accord. As a result, as Jayewardene lamented to *Hindu*, "a peacekeeping force had to become a fighting force."

After nearly a year, the Indian troops have not been able to decisively break the resistance (a fact which has its own repercussions on the domestic Indian scene, where State Assembly elections are pending in Tamil Nadu). Moreover, according to reports here, the Tamil United Liberation Front, the main spokesman for moderate Tamil sentiment, is as yet unwilling to participate in the provincial council elections or otherwise endorse the accord, much to the dismay of Indian officials.