Women Prime Ministers and Presidents

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McFarland

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data available

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 92-56675

ISBN 0-89950-790-5 (lib. bdg.; 50 # acid-free natural paper)

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640

INTRODUCTION

Since Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) stepped into prominence in 1960 as the world's first female prime minister, 20 women have followed as heads of government or state, each a political pioneer in her country. In 1975, Isabel Perón became the world's first female president.

Now is a propitious time to look at them all. Their numbers, of course, will grow; in 1990 alone, five new names came to the front, although only two stayed prominent.

Several women became public figures because of a husband's or father's prominence or position (the Appendage Syndrome, in Antonia Fraser's apt term). Tragedy, however, cast long shadows. Four suffered a husband's assassination and one, a father's execution. Each appalling event left the survivor with a sense of mission. Less dramatically, other women steadily climbed party ladders to arrive at the top. One president and one prime minister were appointed on interim bases.

Among heads of state, power has varied considerably. Certain presidents have wielded much authority; some have been apolitical, acting rather as cultural ambassadors and national symbols. Successes contrast with disappointing performances, one of which caused an outright coup.

On their way to high office or after leaving it, five women suffered imprisonment or house detention. One prime minister was struck down by bullets. Complex social and political forces have washed over many. Wars have intruded.

Chronologically arranged, this book of profiles briefly unfolds the careers of the famous and the lesser known and shows sharp differences in political affiliation, character, charisma, vision, and fervent advocacy. Since a few careers are ongoing, more remains to be told. My aim has been to provide objective accounts; the reader is invited to make comparisons and assessments.

Few of these pioneers have labeled themselves feminist, but as a pioneer each is important. By virtue of being first in her post, each leader, whatever her accomplishments or length of term, is assured a niche in her country's history.

I should like to express my deep appreciation to my husband John B. Opfell for wide-ranging help and encouragement. My special thanks go to Ruth Loring, who asked pertinent questions and made valuable suggestions. I am also grateful to Jenny Erickson and Dorrit Grina for supplying me with many articles I might otherwise have missed and to Bernard Kouzouma, Victor Nakas, Sara Lessley, Michael Parks, Hanne E. Ban, T. W. Maciejowski, and Radio Free Europe for providing various details. Finally I thank those embassies in Washington, D.C., that graciously responded to my requests for biographical information and photographs.

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SIRIMAVO BANDARANAIKE

Prime Minister of Ceylon (later Sri Lanka)
(1960–65, 1970–77)

A devastating family tragedy in 1959 thrust a relatively unknown widow into the international spotlight. Because of a murder, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first woman prime minister. Ten months before she took office in 1960 in Colombo, Ceylon, she had seen her husband, Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike, stagger into their villa, his body pierced by bullets. So with stunning immediacy began the active political career of which she had never dreamed.

The family lineage included many members of the old Kandyan ruling aristocracy. Sirimavo, the eldest daughter of Barnes and Kumarihamy Ratwatte, was born on April 17, 1916, at her great-aunt's house in Ratnapura, a city in the foothills surrounding the old capital of Kandy. The Ratwatte home was in Balangoda, 33 miles away on the Horton Plain, Ceylon's highest plateau. But because the young mother had already lost two infants, a soothsayer had advised her to have her third child in another place.

Kumarihamy and her baby spent a couple of months in the ancestral mansion of her father, the old chieftain of Balangoda district, the Ratemahatmaya Mahawalatenne, who on his death would bequeath his post to his son-in-law, Barnes Ratwatte. Over the next few years at Balangoda, Kumarihamy would bear another daughter and three more sons.

Sirimavo attended a private nursery school in Balangoda. Then she was sent to Ratnapura to live with her great-aunt while she went to kindergarten. A year later, she began her formal schooling at St. Bridget's Convent in Colombo, where she would stay for 11 years. Eventually her three brothers joined her there. It was a memorable occasion for the

family when their father, dressed in colorful, ceremonial robes for the impending governor's levy, came to visit.

In 1934, just as a malaria epidemic struck Ceylon, Sirimavo came back home. Often she accompanied her father on his circuit of the area. "I learned we were on the same wave length," she said later. "I began to understand how he felt about the people he had looked after for years and how his heart yearned for their welfare." During the crisis the Ratwattes operated a convalescent home, where the tall, grave-eyed girl worked tirelessly with her mother. By the end of 1935 the epidemic was under control, and Mrs. Ratwatte turned over the household duties to her daughter so she could practice the natural healing techniques she had learned from her father, the old chieftain Mahawalatenne.

Away from domestic duties, Sirimavo learned to do exquisite embroidery; grew prize roses with her father; and, like him and her sister, became a keen tennis player. She also took time to work for the Balangoda Service League, a group of young volunteers.

In 1940 her parents arranged a marriage they hoped would bring their daughter both happiness and success. Their choice was Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, a bespectacled, pipe-smoking lawyer and politician 17 years her senior. His father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, a wealthy landowner, had once been the chief Ceylonese aide to the British governor. The younger Solomon was definitely a "political animal." Fresh from Oxford and the English bar, he had been elected in 1931 to the newly formed Legislative Assembly, or State Council.

Europe had entered Ceylonese history with the Portuguese invasion of 1505. The Dutch had taken over by 1658. British rule, begun in 1796, had dotted the island with coffee, tea, cinnamon, coconut, and rubber plantations and benefited both the Ratwatte and Bandaranaike families. But as the 20th century brought increasing demands for independence, Solomon had taken up the cause.

His dream was tied to a fervid devotion to his Sinhalese heritage. Descendants of immigrants from northern India, the Buddhist Sinhalese constituted about 70 percent of the Ceylonese population. Especially proud of their ancient language and culture, they were fiercely resented by the Hindu Tamils, about 20 percent of the population. Sprung from southern Indian immigrants, the Tamils had a far different language and religion. In 1937, Solomon formed the Sinhala Maha Sabha, an organization pledged to make Buddhism the national religion and Sinhalese the national language.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike: courtesy Embassy of Sri Lanka, Washington, D.C.

Before any engagement between the Ratwattes' daughter and the volatile politician could be announced, soothsayers were consulted and pronounced all the omens auspicious for a union between a first-rank family of the lowlands and a first-rank family of the Kandyan highlands. The wedding was a lavish affair, but the bridegroom chose to appear in a hand-loomed outfit, emulating his hero, Mohandas K. Gandhi.

A year after her marriage, Sirimavo joined the Lanka Mahila Samiti, the Ceylon Women's Association, pledged "to ameliorate rural conditions and improve the social and economic life of the people, particularly in the rural areas." Village institutions were set up in various places. Sirimavo would later write, "There were many occasions when we would travel through narrow jungle paths, ridden with leeches and serpents, wade through floods, ford rivers, climb hills and dales, find our way over almost impossible trails. Such visits were necessary to see for ourselves that

the women were maintaining the standards of hygienic living, cultivating their home gardens, giving a simple but balanced diet to their families, taking an active part in community self-help schemes."

The Bandaranaikes' first child Sunetra was born in 1943. Chandraka arrived a few years later, and a son, Anura, was born in 1949. Like their mother, the children would be sent to Catholic schools. Like her father, Sunetra would attend Oxford.

After World War II, political groups could finally look forward to the first parliamentary election promised by the British. In 1946, Solomon's Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP), the Ceylon Muslim League, and the Tamil-influenced Ceylon National Congress formed the United National party (UNP) under the leadership of D. D. Senanayake. In 1947, Solomon was elected to the new House of Representatives and appointed minister of health and local government.

Ceylon's role as a crown colony ended the next year when it gained Dominion status and became an independent member of the Commonwealth. It was, however, still tied to the British Crown through a governor-general.

While Solomon gained prominence in the UNP, Sirimavo held various offices in the Lanka Mahila Samiti. Meanwhile, as her husband's confidante, she was receiving a special kind of political education.

To Solomon, who was one of the few cabinet members not related to Senanayake, the UNP seemed too Western oriented. So in 1951 he resigned from the government and the UNP and, under his old party banner, was reelected to the House of Representatives, where he became leader of the opposition.

Senanayake was killed in a fall from his horse in 1952 and was succeeded by his son Dudley. The elder Senanayake had instituted a policy of providing a free ration of rice to every Ceylonese. But in 1953 the "rice issue," an attempt to increase the price of the grain, led to mass riots, many deaths, and the declaration of a state of emergency. Citing ill health, Dudley Senanayake resigned; his uncle by marriage, Sir John Kotelawa, followed him in office.

In 1956 Solomon Bandaranaike formed the People's United Front (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, or MEP), an alliance of his SLFP with independent and leftist parties, both Trotskyites and Communists. The purpose was to topple Kotelawa and the UNP. To gain money for the election, the Bandaranaikes mortgaged their house at Rosmead Place.

Sirimavo canvassed for her husband in the Ratnapura-Balangoda

area. Waging the campaign largely on nationalistic issues, the MEP achieved a stunning victory, and Solomon became prime minister. But the Bandaranaikes chose to remain at Rosmead Place rather than live at Temple Trees, the official residence, which they intended to use only for formal entertaining.

The new leader would bring about significant changes. Quickly he introduced legislation to make Buddhism the national religion and Sinhalese the national language, replacing English. The Sinhalese Only Act, however, set off bloody riots in the Tamil-speaking Hindu population to the north.

In 1957 terrible floods destroyed crops and led to unemployment and serious labor troubles. As Solomon faced mounting tensions, he eased back from his decision about the Sinhalese language and assured the Tamils that they would be allowed "reasonable use" of their native tongue. In May 1958, communal strains broke out again, and gangs of thugs and looters entered the fray. After five days of fierce fighting, the government declared a state of emergency that would last until 1959.

Internationally, the MEP advocated a neutralist policy, but the prime minister was actually busy establishing ties with the Communists. To show his colors, he turned to a huge program of nationalization and the establishment of state monopolies. The press was openly critical of his plans to nationalize the tea and rubber plantations, banks, and insurance companies. It further deplored his Ceylon Transport Board, which took over every private bus line on the island with chaotic results. Better received was his agreement with the British to relinquish their military bases in Ceylon.

Sirimavo had remained active in the Lanka Mahila Samiti; she had already served as treasurer and vice-president and was now president. Her concerns were family planning and political rights and education for women. Speaking at one institute in 1958, she disclaimed any political ambitions for herself: "Knowing how difficult it is to cater to all the requirements of a nation and to solidify them I would not accept the post of premier even if it were offered to me."

Then the unexpected happened. On the morning of September 25, 1959, she was busy with preparations for Solomon's trip to the United States, where he was to address the United Nations General Assembly in New York and meet with President Dwight D. Eisenhower in Washington, D.C. A small group of well-wishers gathered on the Bandaranaike veranda, hoping to catch a glimpse of the prime minister, who was inside

the villa chatting with the new American ambassador. Sirimavo stepped into the side garden to speak with her brother.

In the waiting group stood Talduwe Somorama, a disgruntled young Buddhist monk. Bandaranaike emerged from the house to see the ambassador to his car and then returned to the veranda. At that moment, the yellow-robed monk lunged forward and fired, hitting his target four times. Shouting, the prime minister stumbled into the house. Hearing the commotion, Sirimavo rushed in from the garden and saw her husband half lying in a chair, stoutly insisting that he was all right. After his sister-in-law, a physician, examined him and found no wounds near his heart, he was carried to his car and driven to the hospital.

Before being taken to the operating room, Solomon Bandaranaike dictated a statement to the nation, asking for forgiveness and compassion for his attacker. Afterward he talked freely with Sirimavo and her brothers, who thought he would recover. But by morning he was dead. His widow would later say that it would have been impossible for her to live through the nightmare without the help of her mother, sister, and brothers. She was to wear traditional white mourning saris for three years.

Solomon Bandaranaike was briefly succeeded by the minister of education, Wijayananda Dahanayake; then new elections were set for March 1960. As the widow of a national hero who had brought the government back to the common people, Mrs. Banda, as she was affectionately dubbed, was asked to campaign on behalf of the SLFP. Wanting to perpetuate Solomon's memory, she traveled tirelessly through Ceylon, delivering speeches and playing tapes of her husband's speeches. At times she seemed so emotional that opponents dubbed her the weeping widow. She had not agreed to become a candidate.

The SLFP won 46 seats in the House of Representatives, four fewer than the UNP. Dudley Senanayake, the UNP leader, then formed a minority government, only to lose his first vote of confidence. He stayed on in a caretaker capacity because elections were scheduled for July.

In May, Sirimavo was unanimously appointed head of the SLFP. Years later, she would say, "I would personally have preferred to keep away from politics, giving more of my time to my fatherless children, who needed my care and attention and to whom I had to play the part of both father and mother. My fate was to be different from what I thought." But she believed she must work for the welfare of the millions who had loved Solomon.

One of her first actions, based on Solomon's 1956 strategy, was to

enter an agreement with Ceylon's two Marxist parties, the Trotskyites and the Communists, that none of the three groups would contest a seat the others were campaigning for. She firmly declined to run in July, explaining that she had no wish to be leader of the opposition party in case the SLFP did not win.

It turned out that the party won 75 out of 151 seats in the House of Representatives. In July, as party leader, Sirimavo was appointed prime minister. Independent candidates brought the SLFP six more seats, and as head of government she could suggest six other names to the governor-general. That working majority made it unnecessary to depend on Marxist supporters, at least for the present.

Still, she was in the peculiar position of not being a member of the parliament. To remedy the situation, Sir Oliver Goonetilloke, the governor-general, named her to one of the 15 appointed seats in the Senate, the upper legislative house.

To her high post Sirimavo brought a resolute commitment to follow through on Solomon's socialism and nationalization program and his encouragement of Buddhism and the Sinhalese language and culture. One of her early moves, which angered the United States, was to assume control of the oil companies.

In August, the government took over seven Ceylonese newspapers and transferred them to corporations in which the government and the public held shares. By December, Sirimavo announced a huge takeover of private state-aided schools run by religious groups.

Her most controversial measure was to enforce the use of Sinhalese. When 2 million Tamils revolted against her decree, Sirimavo sent troops into the Tamil provinces, where they remained until 1963.

Having reserved the portfolios of minister of defense and minister of external affairs for herself, Sirimavo declared a policy of neutrality in international affairs. In March 1962 she attended the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London, becoming the first woman to sit at the Commonwealth table.

That same year, a plot to overthrow the government by force was discovered just in time. It was evidence that the SLFP did not enjoy great popularity. The country suffered from an alarming economic situation. There always seemed to be a food crisis; with an exploding population, Ceylon had to import one-third of its food and be dependent on the vagaries of the world market. When opponents taunted her with the remark that a woman's place was in her home, in her kitchen, Ban-

daranaike replied, "A woman's place is everywhere and anywhere duty requires her to be and also in her kitchen." (She was a fine cook.)

To strengthen her hold, Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964 formed a coalition with the Trotskyites, who demanded more press curbs and tighter trade controls. Her decision to put newspapers under governmental supervision led inexorably to her downfall. The SLFP lost a vote of confidence in the House of Representatives, and elections were scheduled for 1965. Voters returned UNP's Dudley Senanayake to office. But Bandaranaike won the Attanagalla seat for herself and became the leader of the opposition. Once in power, Senanayake seemed surprisingly reluctant to turn the nationalization program about. Every year his problems grew. By 1970, unemployment, inflation, and a bungled irrigation project made for a critical situation.

Once again Bandaranaike turned to her old allies, the pro–Moscow Communist party and six Trotskyite parties—the United Front—and swept Senanayake out of office. During a vigorous campaign, she had contended that it was not possible for the UNP to seek a fresh mandate because it had not solved Ceylon's problems. Instead, she charged, it had sold out to the United States and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Back at her old desk, clearly savoring her electoral triumph, a two-thirds majority, Sirimavo Bandaranaike appointed a 21-member cabinet, including six Trotskyites and one Communist.

Now the SLFP set its course on ending the 22 years of British Dominion status. Full independence became its battle cry. Defiantly Sirimavo Bandaranaike announced that the 157 members of the House of Representatives had approved the establishment of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution making Ceylon "a sovereign and independent republic pledged to recognize the objectives of a socialist democracy."

The prime minister's ties to the Communists grew ever closer. She extended recognition to North Vietnam, the Viet Cong's provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam, North Korea, and East Germany. At the same time she severed diplomatic relations with Israel.

Now the nationalization program extended to foreign banks. Several Ceylonese banks were set up to finance the development of industry, agriculture, and trade. But the Bandaranaike government provided no incentives for acquiring wealth. No business firm was allowed to pay dividends of more than 12 percent annually, and no Ceylonese could receive a monthly salary of more than $600.

As Bandaranaike proceeded confidently on the nationalization program, she met opposition for not moving quickly enough. Violence broke out in the southern and central provinces. Youthful leftists and unemployed workers, calling themselves Marxists or Guevarists (for the Cuban revolutionary, Che Guevara) led the bitter revolt, seizing roads and bridges and attacking governmental installations. In 25 separate incidents they called for the overthrow of the government.

Bandaranaike gave the army full authority to use search-and-seizure techniques, to set 24-hour curfews, and to impose martial law. Handicapped by limited military equipment, she sought arms from the Soviet Union, Egypt, Yugoslavia, Palestinian groups, Britain, and the United States.

The rebels, using jungle cover, were hard to defeat. By September 1971, however, 9,000 had turned in their weapons, and 5,000 captives were placed in special detention camps. The death toll was estimated at about 3,000. Many had been executed by military firing squads.

Like her predecessors, Bandaranaike had advocated a small defense budget, but now she was forced to double it to purchase expensive weapons from the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. She also had to spend over $16 million to repair roads and damaged installations.

After the trauma of the rebellion, it was good to anticipate the full independence Britain had finally promised. Bandaranaike presided over ceremonies on May 22, 1972, when Ceylon became the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The proud new name meant "great and beautiful island." The governor-general, William Gollapawa, was declared president, and Bandaranaike remained prime minister.

Following 22 months of deliberation, the Constituent Assembly approved the new constitution, which provided for a unicameral National Assembly with six-year terms. The last link to Britain disappeared when lawyers were denied appeal to the Privy Council in London. In keeping with Socialist dogma, the constitution excluded the rights to private property and called for the collective ownership of property, including land.

Meanwhile, Bandaranaike still felt shocked by the ultraleftist rebellion of the previous year, and she kept her country on military alert. Her political troubles were far from over. The coalition became shaky when the Communists withdrew their support after the adoption of a bill that permitted the courts to use normally inadmissible evidence in confessions.

Economically, the news stayed worrisome, too. A trade deficit of

$625 million resulted from a depleted coconut crop and a drop in world coconut prices, while a severe drought affected the rice crop. Tea plantations were nationalized, and legislation was introduced to limit personal income to about 2,000 rupees (approximately $300) per month. The year 1973 proved equally disastrous. Basic foods had to be put on wartime rationing, and political officials took control of agriculture.

All the while, steady streams of intellectuals and professionals were leaving the country. To stem the tide, the Bandaranaike government made all emigrants sign bonds obliging them to send back to Sri Lanka up to 10 percent of their earnings. It was, a government spokesman explained, a way of paying for some of the free education the emigrants had received.

The same year, Bandaranaike lost her longtime opponent when Dudley Senanayake died. Senanayake's successor as leader of the UNP was Junius R. Jayewardene, who seemed unable to lead the parliamentary opposition effectively.

Constantly, Bandaranaike's leftist allies pressed her to nationalize more banks and plantations, but she argued that doing so might mean welfare aid, which she felt her pauper state could not afford.

Late in 1974, when she was visiting Moscow, Trotskyites called for a union rally and street demonstrations. Angrily she balked and told her government that the rally must be banned. Her order was carried out, but she was not happy over the showdown. She knew she had to remain dependent on the far Left to prevent demands for higher wages. Food stayed in short supply. Only a shipment from China averted a grave crisis; then, following the Chinese lead, other governments began sending food.

Special courts now thought it was time to release some of the youths imprisoned for the 1971 riots. But the students continued to show their restlessness, and the more than 750,000 unemployed grew more desperate. Bandaranaike doubled the size of the army. Throughout 1975, Colombo buzzed with rumors of an imminent breakup of the United Front. On September 1, President Gollapawa sent letters to the ministers who belonged to the Trotskyite Equality party, telling them they had been fired.

The prime minister had disagreed with the Trotskyites' new demands. She agreed with them about nationalizing some 400 estates left in private hands, but could not accept their insistence on controlling the people there. With their domination of key unions and university campuses, she thought they already controlled enough. On the other hand, she retained her alliance with the pro–Moscow Communists.