

Sangam.org - Ilankai Tamil Sangam Association of Tamils of Sri Lanka in the USA

- [Active Home Page](#)
- [Previous Version Archive](#)
- [Original Version Home Page](#)

Pirapaharan Chapter 13. Militants come to the Fore

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published October 19, 2003



Militants come to the Fore

Jayewardene's media attack on Amirthalingam, the police rampage in Jaffna and the 1977 riots had the combined effect of pushing the Tamil moderates aside and brought the militants to the fore. Jayewardene's expectation that Tamil people would be frightened failed, though it succeeded to some extent with Amirthalingam and the TULF leadership.

The TULF participated in several conferences the government called to deal with the Tamil people affected by the riots. It made use of those meetings to raise the problems concerning government servants affected by the disturbances. Jayewardene readily agreed to accommodate TULF concerns.

The TULF attended the Jaffna District Agricultural Committee meeting held on 18 December 1977 at the Jaffna Secretariat which was presided over by Trade Minister Lalith Athulathmudali. The TULF waived its decision to boycott the meetings attended by ministers for this purpose. When that decision became known, the youths were boisterous. They pasted posters condemning that decision all over Jaffna town. They threatened to demonstrate opposite the Jaffna Secretariat. Police protection was provided to Tamil leaders to enable them to move around in Jaffna, denoting the fall of the influence of the moderates in Jaffna.

I was in Jaffna to cover Athulathmudali's visit. I reported Amirthalingam's eloquent speech extensively in the *Daily News*.



A. Amirthalingam

He said: It is the duty of the Tamil community to extend its support to Prime Minister J. R. Jayewardene and enable him to solve the many problems that the community faces. The Prime Minister has assured us that he will solve them in a just and fair manner. He should be given a fair chance. Goodwill is a vital commodity today. This is being extended to the government in full measure. I hope the government will translate its promise into action."

The TULF extended this policy of cooperation in parliament also. Amirthalingam told parliament on 21 December 1977: An opposition's role is not to oppose everything. They have to criticize whatever they thought was wrong, support whatever they thought was right and give their suggestion on the manner the administration should be carried on."

On 26 December, he told me in a special interview to the *Daily News*, "This is not a new stand. The TULF election manifesto itself had declared its support to a peaceful solution to the problems."

Jayewardene was pleased with that far-fetched interpretation Amirthalingam gave to the TULF election manifesto.



Jayewardene

That was what he wanted the TULF to do, to lend him credibility in the eyes of the international community, to be looked on as a reasonable leader who treated the Tamil minorities with justice and fairness. He declared in January 1978 that he would take steps to solve the problems of the Tamils, whatever the consequences. This made the TULF to further soften its stand towards the government. It did not organize the usual black flag demonstration on 4 February 1978, the thirtieth anniversary of independence. It said it had decided to forgo the demonstration because Jayewardene, on whom it had placed great trust, was taking his oath as the Executive President on that day. Jayewardene took this office of Executive

President by amending the 1972 constitution. On 22 April 1978, TULF went a step further and decided to serve in all standing committees of parliament.

Militants followed these developments with extreme irritation. The TULF that adopted the separate state resolution in May 1976, which obtained the mandate for setting up a constituent assembly to draw, adopt and implement the constitution for Tamil Eelam in July 1977, had almost fallen "prostrate" before the mighty President Jayewardene by April 1978. During this period, Jayewardene, who won the 1977 July election with a mammoth four-fifths majority, was engaged in enacting the de Gaullist, executive- presidential constitution which became operative on 7 September 1978. That constitution paved the way to make him all-powerful - the head of the executive, the head of the cabinet, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the head of his party, the UNP.

Jayewardene had also demonstrated through the post election violence of July 1977, when gangs of UNP thugs went round in government vehicles and attacked their political rivals, mainly supporters of Sirimavo Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), through the backing he gave the policemen who went on a rampage in Jaffna and through the 1977 August anti- Tamil riots, that he would brook no opposition.



Sirimavo Bandaranaike

The Tamil militants felt that Jayewardene's message had sunk deep into the psyche of the TULF leadership. The militants concluded in their internal discussions held after the 1977 riots that the role of the moderate Tamil leadership in the struggle for winning the rights of the Tamil people was over. All that the moderates could do thereafter was to seek favours from the mighty Jayewardene. That would amount to slavery, the militants reasoned. The only possible way out of this weak situation was armed resistance.

Organized armed resistance

The adoption of the Vaddukoddai Resolution in May 1976 was a landmark in the development of armed resistance in Sri Lanka. The three armed groups then active, the Pirapaharan group (the name LTTE was not known to the public then), the Thangathurai group (TELO was founded in 1977) and EROS, interpreted the Vaddukoddai Resolution as giving them authority to launch the struggle of armed liberation. They reasoned that democratic, non-violent agitation would fail and the only option open to the Tamils was armed struggle. They earnestly started preparing the ground for organized armed resistance.

Till then the militant groups performed the role of pressure groups, pressurizing first the Federal Party, then from 1972 onwards the Tamil United Front and, after the adoption of the Vaddukoddai Resolution, for movement towards the goal of a separate state. The militants found keeping the TULF leaders, used to enjoying the privileges of parliamentary politics, on the track of a liberation struggle was itself a struggle. The militants decided that they would have to take upon themselves the difficult task of leadership.

They were aware of the hardships that lay before them. The police and the armed services were superior in men and weapons. To battle them the militant groups would require more men, better training, a richer armoury and fuller commitment from their fighters. Pirapaharan was the first to realize that a sporadic hit-and-hide strategy would not make a liberation struggle. It had to be an organized, programmed effort. He was the first to start a training camp, Poonthoddam, about two miles (three kilometers) from Vavuniya town. He was followed by EROS which started its own camp at Kannady Farm, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) further south of Vavuniya town. The third group, led by Thangathurai, 'Thanganna' to his cadres, had no properly organized camp. It used the palmyrah grove of Thondamanaru for its training.

The three groups mingled with each other at this time. Leaders and cadres of LTTE and EROS used to meet each other and occasionally teach each other the new skills they had acquired. I have had lengthy sessions with two EROS founders, A. R. Arudpragasam (Arular) and Shanker Raji, for whom I did some private help. I helped edit Arudpragasam's book *The Traditional Homeland of the Tamils* and did translation of some documents from English to Tamil for Shanker Raji. They told me of the period where Pirapaharan, Shanker Raji, Padmanabha, Balakumar and Uma Maheswaran (who joined in 1977) had trained together. They used to visit each other in their farms.

Shanker Raji told me that, when he went to Pirapaharan's enclosure in the hut he lived in in late 1976, he saw a yellow-covered book "Teach Yourself Shooting" of the then famous Teach Yourself series.

"I picked up the book," Shanker Raji said, "and asked Pirapaharan whether it had helped him to improve his shooting skill. He said it had helped him to understand the scientific basis of shooting." Shanker Raji said with a tinge of admiration: "Piraba's shooting skill is marvelous, something inborn."

Shanker Raji ('Rajee') also described a shooting match he had had with Pirapaharan in the LTTE's Poonthoddam camp.

Rajee had gone there when Pirapaharan was practicing shooting. Pirapaharan gave his .22 revolver to Rajee and walked up to a half wall about 15 feet (five meters) away. He picked up a marmite box and placed it on a half wall. "Now, shoot," Pirapaharan told Rajee. "I was hesitant," Rajee told me. "I was not used to that weapon. But Pirapaharan was insistent. "Shoot, will you," he said. Rajee said he fired and the bullet and it grazed the box which trembled and fell. Pirapaharan picked it up, replaced it and went to Rajee.

"He took aim and fired. It was bull's eye, " Rajee told me.

Arudpragasam told me another incident about Pirapaharan's marksmanship. This incident happened in May 1977 when Pirapaharan visited the Kannady farm. Arudpragasam took Pirapaharan on a hunting expedition. They came across a pond full of ducks. Pirapaharan had a rifle with him. He was excited. He pointed to a duck that looked bigger than the others. "Shall I shoot that?" he asked Arudpragasam. "Try," Arudpragasam consented. The flock took off at the sound of the gunshot, except the one Pirapaharan had pointed at. It was splashing and trying to fly. It could not.

Pirapaharan, in shorts, waded through waist-deep water, with the rifle held aloft on one hand. He lifted the bird with the other, a show of achievement.

Arudpragasam, Shankar Rajee and many others told me that Pirapaharan always likes to win and when he wins, he enjoys it.

Pirapaharan rarely carries rifles. He always carries a revolver. Whenever he gets an opportunity, he exhibits his extraordinary skill with it. Arudpragasam told me one such incident. "We were walking along a footpath near the Kannady farm when I spotted a squirrel on the bark of a tree. "Can you shoot that?" I asked Pirapaharan. He shot it and the bullet had hit its head," he said.

EROS was also active in the latter part of 1976 in preparing its cadres and helping the LTTE for a prolonged armed struggle. Apart from opening the Kannady farm, it sent its leaders for military training in Lebanon. With men of intellectual bent and Marxist orientation, the EROS London leadership struck up a close relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organization's representative in UK, Syed Hameed, who arranged training for EROS cadres in Lebanon. Ratnasabapathy, Arudpragasam, Rajee and Kanagasuntharam went for training in the latter part of 1976.

"That was a new experience for us," Rajee told me. "All that we experienced in Sri Lanka until then was a few hand grenade explosions. We had not seen even an armoured car or an actual war front. From London, we flew to Beirut and from there we were taken to a PLO base camp. Then we were taken in an armoured car, captured from the Israelis and to the actual scene of fighting. We heard for the first time in our lives shells bursting around us," Rajee said. Training was tough and the food completely foreign. "We were longing to eat rice," Rajee said.

EROS sent Arudpragasam to Kannady Farm in September to train the local cadres on the new knowledge he had gained. Within days of his arrival, he visited Poonthoddam and met with Pirapaharan. "I told Pirapaharan of the war front we had visited and the new dimension of the war we had seen. He was impressed. I told him of the effective use PLO fighters were making of landmines. He was thrilled when I described how Palestinian guerrillas blasted an Israeli tank and restricted the movement of the army," he said. Arudpragasam, an engineering graduate of the Soviet Union's Lumumba University, agreed to pass on the knowledge he had gained about bomb-making during his Lebanese training in return for explosive chemicals.

Explosive materials were usually taken from Poonthoddam to Kannady Farm by LTTE cadres. Once an LTTE carrier got down from the bus at a wrong point and lost his way. Villagers who found an outsider wandering in the forest informed the police. He was arrested because he could not explain his presence in the forest with a can of nitric acid. Arudpragasam went to the police and told them that it was he who sent the boy to his farm and he had missed his way. He said the nitric acid was to be poured into snake pits.

Shankar Rajee came from London and joined Arudpragasam in Kannady Farm by the end of September 1976. Both visited Poonthoddam and shared their experience about Lebanon and the knowledge about landmines. They succeeded in making Pirapaharan interested in sending his cadres for training in Lebanon.

The Secret Meeting

The militant groups, while preparing themselves for the long-term objective of armed struggle, continued with their role of a pressure group very actively. They were very close to Tamil United Front, especially its youth wing, Tamil Elaygnar Peravai, which had become the TUF's Youth Front, taking directions from Amirthalingam. Pirapaharan and Thangathurai had close links with Amirthalingam and met him secretly very often. It was during one such secret meeting in early 1977 that Amirthalingam suggested to Pirapaharan he take Uma Maheswaran into his group. Uma Maheswaran was from Tellipalai. His real name was Kathirgamapillai Nallainathan. He was a surveyor working in the Government Surveyor General's Department in Colombo. He was the secretary of the Colombo branch of the Tamil Elaignar Peravai and agitated for the adoption of the Vaddukoddai Resolution.

Pirapaharan accepted Amirthalingam's advice and invited the English-speaking Uma Maheswaran, a powerful orator, some ten years older than him, to join the LTTE. Pirapaharan took him to a Central Committee meeting and introduced him to the others and announced his decision to divide the posts of chairman of the Central Committee and military commander. He had held both posts since the founding of the LTTE. He then proposed Uma Maheswaran as the chairman, which the others welcomed. The 5-member central committee was reconstituted to accommodate Uma Maheswaran, who was known in LTTE circles as 'Mountain.' Uma Maheswaran took the secrecy oath and declared that he would abide by the LTTE code of

conduct, which included avoidance of sex relationships. After that Uma Maheswaran handled political affairs, leaving Pirapaharan to concentrate on military matters.

Relations between the LTTE and the TULF were smooth until the 1977 July elections. The LTTE worked tirelessly for the TULF's victory. Uma Maheswaran, whose relationship with the LTTE was secret, campaigned openly. Pirapaharan, too, was involved in the campaign. They told the voters that their vote for the TULF was a vote for Tamil Eelam. They were disappointed when the TULF decided to accept the opposition leader post and to go soft on the Tamil Eelam demand.

The LTTE Central Committee discussed the TULF decision to become the official opposition, which they agreed was not in keeping with the mandate the TULF had obtained from the people. Then Pirapaharan raised the vital question whether the LTTE should review its relationship with the TULF. In that, my sources said, Pirapaharan took a firm ideological stand. He argued the LTTE should snap their relationship with anyone who fails to stick to the mandate the people had given them. "Those people (TULF leaders) have not honoured the trust the people had placed on them," the 23-year-old Pirapaharan thundered.

I was told there was a division of opinion. Besides Uma and Pirapaharan, Patkunarajah (Saravanan) who took part in Duraipappah's murder, Ragavan, Visweshwaran, Nagarajah, Vaathi, Thangarajah, Bala and Iyer took part in the discussion. Patkunarajah took the position that the LTTE should continue to coordinate its activities with the TULF.

Even Pirapaharan was not prepared at that time to break their relations with the TULF. Amirthalingam was still the 'Thalapati,' the commander. He enjoyed public support. His oratory still swayed the people. But the militants stepped up their pressure on him. They continued with their campaign calling for the convening of the Convention of the Tamil-speaking members of parliament for the drafting of the constitution of Tamil Eelam.

The TULF could not ignore this demand, but was not sure how Jayewardene and the UNP would react. It also had to keep the militant youths calm. It was an agonizing period for the TULF leadership. Most of the TULF parliamentarians were upset. They told Amirthalingam, "You told us that the 'boys' are under your control. Now they are getting out of hand."

Amirthalingam summoned Uma Maheswaran and told him of the worry his colleagues had expressed. "You must get your men to go slow," he told him and invited Uma Maheswaran to bring the LTTE hierarchy for a meeting. That meeting took place in November 1977 in Amirthalingam's residence at Moolai. Seven LTTE leaders attended that meeting. They were: Uma Maheswaran, Pirapaharan, Nagarajah, Ragavan, Visweshwaran, Patkunarajah and Baby Subramaniam.

Amirthalingam told them firmly: Jayewardene had won the elections and he should be given a chance to find a solution to the problems of the Tamils. Similarly, the TULF should also be given a chance to test the sincerity of Jayewardene. He said the people had chosen them as their leaders and they should be allowed to tackle the problem the way they think suitable. The killings, he said, had gone up and should be stopped at least for the time being.

"I am not asking you to give up violence, but you should cool down," Amirthalingam said.

None, including Pirapaharan, said anything until Amirthalingam asked for their comments about the possible relationship between the TULF and the LTTE. Uma Maheswaran suggested that the LTTE could function as the armed wing of the TULF. Amirthalingam agreed on condition that the arrangement was kept secret.

Amirthalingam was pleased with the meeting. Pirapaharan, who had kept silent throughout the meeting, had other plans. He had already launched in February 1977 the plan to destroy the police network that the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) had assiduously built in Jaffna and he planned to continue with this plan.

Next:

Chapter 14: LTTE emerges supreme
Will be posted on: October 13, 2003

[Index to Earlier Chapters:](#)

[Introduction Part 1](#)

[Introduction Part 2](#)

[Chapter 1: Why didn't he hit back? Chapter 2: Going in for a revolver](#)

[Chapter 3: The Unexpected Explosion](#)

[Chapter 4: Tamil Mood Toughens](#)

[Chapter 5: Tamil Youths Turn Assertive](#)

[Chapter 6: Birth of Tamil New Tigers](#)

[Chapter 7: The Cyanide Suicide](#)

[Chapter 8: First Military Operation](#)

[Chapter 9. TNT matures to LTTE](#)

[Chapter 10. Mandate Affirmed](#)

[Chapter 11. The Mandate Ratified](#)

[Chapter 12. Moderates Ignore Mandate](#)



Print "Pirapaharan

Chapter 13. Militants come to the Fore"

[Send this article to someone you know!](#)

The views and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Ilankai Tamil Sangam, USA, Inc., its members, or its affiliates.

© 1996-2010 Ilankai Tamil Sangam, USA, Inc.

Ilankai Tamil Sangam, USA, Inc. - The Association of Tamils of Sri Lanka in the USA