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Pirapaharan, Chapter 34 Tamils Follow Militant Leadership

by **T. Sabaratnam**; published March 25, 2004



34: Tamils Follow Militant Leadership

Traitors

The decision taken by the TULF Working Committee at its meeting on 11 May 1983 at its Nallur office to contest the local government election fixed for 18 May, despite the opposition of the militants, caused the political eclipse of the moderates. That was a fatal error committed by the TULF leadership, especially by its secretary general Amirthalingam. He had misread the mood of the militant youths and that of the Tamil people.

That was also the result of a fatal mistake Jayewardene and his political strategists made. Jayewardene's strategy during this period was to drive a wedge between the moderate TULF and the militant youths in the hope of depriving the armed guerrillas popular support and then deal with them militarily. The TULF leadership was under the impression that the people were with them as at 4 June 1981 District Development Council election. In that election, which was vehemently opposed by the militant youths, the TULF polled a massive 263,369 votes, about 80 percent of the total votes, in the Jaffna district and captured all ten seats up for grabs.



JR Jayawardene

"People are still with us," Amirthalingam assured the Working Committee and added, "They have not accepted the boys. They know the boys can cause some mischief and nothing more." The TULF leadership was pathetically out of touch with reality. In 1981, the burning of the Jaffna library and the brief arrest of Amirthalingam swung the electorate in favour of the TULF. At that time the people placed their trust in the decisions of the TULF leaders. They also believed that the militant youths could not provide an alternate leadership. Their belief then was that the militants were all young and capable of performing only heroic deeds- attacks on police stations, committing bank robberies and similar daring acts- and were not mature enough to take far-reaching political decisions. By 1983, the mood of the Tamil people had drastically changed. They had started questioning the decisions of the TULF leaders. They had begun to question particularly the decision of the TULF leaders to place their trust in Jayewardene. Yet they were not fully convinced that the militant youths could provide them real leadership. They openly voiced that doubt.

They openly asked the speakers at the meetings conducted by the General Union of Eelam Students (GUES) whether they could provide the Tamil people leadership. They told the youthful speakers: TULF leaders are learned and tested men. You are all raw and inexperienced boys. How can we place our future in your hands?

Most of the militant groups had no answer. Then Pirapaharan stepped in to provide the reply. He demonstrated that he could provide military and political leadership. And Jayewardene provided Pirapaharan the necessary environment to do so.

For Pirapaharan the situations in 1981 and 1983 were completely different. In 1981 he was a hunted man. Police and security forces were after him. He was in flight. He was also organizationally weak. His trusted colleagues had deserted him and opted to side with Uma Maheswaran. He was a dispirited, tired man. His main concern during the District Development Council election was to flee to Tamil Nadu and reorganize himself.

In 1983 Pirapaharan was brimming with confidence and vitality. He had rebuilt an organization of loyal and active men. Militarily, he had grown strong. He had won the admiration of the people by taking on the army. He was convinced that the time had arrived to lead the people along his chosen path. He was determined the people should be drawn away from the TULF path of collaboration. And Jayewardene provided the TULF leadership with the trap to marginalize themselves from the Tamil people.

JR's Trap

Jayewardene and his strategists, who were upset by the LTTE's 4 March 1983 Umayalpuram ambush, devised a plan to make the TULF clash with the militant groups. The plan was to hold a security conference in Jaffna and get the TULF to participate in it. Outwardly, the agenda of the conference looked innocuous. It read: 1. Review of the security situation in the Jaffna peninsula. 2. Devise steps to improve it. 3. Discuss the possibility of activating the local councils. 4. Any other matters.

Jaffna Government Agent Yogendra Duraisamy was directed to convene the security conference in Jaffna and Jaffna District Minister U. B. Wijekoon was instructed to preside. Yogendra was directed to invite TULF parliamentarians.

Amirthalingam and other TULF leaders from the Jaffna district readily agreed to attend the meeting. When that information leaked, a group of youths met Amirthalingam and asked him not to attend the conference. "What is wrong in attending the conference?" Amirthalingam exploded. "Is it wrong to tell the government to reactivate the local government administration?"

The local government administration, which was earlier under the TULF, was under government-appointed officials in 1983 as elections for the posts had not been held at the end of their term of office. Elections had not been held because the Elections Department ruled that the security situation in the Jaffna district was not conducive to holding them.

The 'boys' told Amirthalingam that the real intention of Jayewardene was to show the international community that he was reactivating the democratic processes in the Tamil areas. "He is going to deceive the donor community and get aid. He will spend that money to strengthen the army," they argued.

Amirthalingam was adamant in attending the conference fixed for 2 April 1983. That morning the Tigers blasted the wing of the Jaffna Secretariat where the conference was scheduled to be held. Yogendra held the conference as scheduled at the Fisheries Corporation building a few kilometers away and TULF leaders, including Amirthalingam, attended it.



Rebuilt Jaffna Kachcheri 2002

The Tigers issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack on the Secretariat. It said: "An armed revolution cannot be suppressed by State terrorists with the help of political opportunists. We bombed the secretariat to give this message."

Amirthalingam ridiculed the Tiger claim in a statement to the Jaffna media. "Thambymar (Younger brothers) must have got the message that blowing up a building or two does not make an armed revolution. They must know that the security conference went on despite their bombing."

Amirthalingam was defiant. He wanted to show the militants and the people that he was the leader. He told a public meeting a few days after the blast: "A ship must have one captain. If all the sailors assume the role of the captain, the ship will flounder and sink. People had given me the mandate in the 1977 election to steer the ship. Let me steer it."

The militants retorted: "If the captain is incapable of steering the ship properly and if it is in the danger of sinking other sailors should push him away and take control of the ship."

The opportunity for the militants to push Amirthalingam out of the Captain's cabin was again provided by Jayewardene. He decided to hold the local government election on 18 May and directed the Elections Commissioner to call for nominations. The TULF, UNP, Tamil Congress and a few independent groups filed nominations.

Pirapa's Leaflet

Pirapaharan decided that the time was opportune to take over the political leadership of the Tamil people. He issued his first signed leaflet in the third week of April 1983. In it Pirapaharan categorically announced the LTTE's decision that Tamils should boycott the local government election. He also called the TULF "traitors."

The following is the translation of the leaflet issued in Tamil:

While the blood is still dripping from the mouth of the state terrorist wolf which bit the people of Tamil Eelam recently, there are attempts by the Sinhala chauvinist state to justify its terrorist acts to the international community by holding a local government election. We cannot permit the actions of the traitors who are collaborating in this effort of Sinhala chauvinism.

The people of Tamil Eelam should get out of the mirage of a Sri Lankan election. They should rally around a popular armed struggle.

The TULF and other political parties did not take that leaflet seriously. They continued with their election preparations and held propaganda meetings. Pirapaharan, always serious in implementing his decisions, went ahead with his programme. In the fourth week of April, LTTE cadres visited the homes of the candidates and politely requested them to withdraw from the contest. They capped their request with the threat: If you fail to heed our plea, you will have to face the consequences.

From the next day the Jaffna daily *Eelanadu* was flooded with advertisements. They read: *I-----(full name) of the --- (party name) hereby inform the public that I have decided to withdraw my candidature from the list of candidates submitted by my party to contest the local government election in----- (name of the local government body).* The Tamil Congress and most of the independent groups also withdrew from the contest. The TULF and UNP were the only parties left.

The LTTE High Command considered the defiance by the UNP and the TULF a challenge. It decided to deal with the UNP first. "They are all quislings and deserve to be dealt with first," was the decision taken by the LTTE leadership. Three groups of gunmen spanned the Jaffna district on 29 April to deal with three selected men. The 43-year-old Vairamuthu Ratnasingham, who headed the UNP list of candidates for Point Pedro, was shot dead by two men who had come on cycles while he was cycling home around noon after meeting some of his supporters. Two bullets pierced his head and he fell dead instantly. The 83-year-old S. S. Muttaiah who contested the Chavakachcheri Town Council election was shot dead at about 4.30 pm when he walked to his neighbour's house. Around 5.30 p.m. that day gunmen stopped the van in which the UNP candidate for Valvettithurai Town Council was traveling, pulled out his guard, S. Rajaratnam, and shot him dead. Rajaratnam was killed because he was the bodyguard of Jaffna UNP organizer K. Ganeshalingam, a trusted lieutenant of Cyril Mathew and the man behind the UNP decision not to withdraw from the contest.

LTTE gunmen left handwritten notes at the sites of their killing. Similarly worded notes read: *--- (Name of the victim) had been sentenced to death for defying the LTTE ban on contesting the election.*

The killings triggered panic. Candidates rushed to *Eelanadu* with their advertisements announcing their withdrawal from the contest. Though the UNP maintained it was not withdrawing, almost all its candidates announced their withdrawal. The TULF also was affected by withdrawals and desertions. All the 35 candidates who filed nominations to contest the Jaffna Municipal Council, including the mayoral candidate, Nagarajah, withdrew their nominations. But Amirthalingam was defiant. He said his party would contest even if some of its candidates withdrew.



A. Amirthalingam

Amirthalingam made use of a flaw in the election law, which prevented withdrawals after nominations are finalized, to do this. The law stipulates that names of candidates remain on the ballot paper even if they withdraw from the contest.

The LTTE leadership took Amirthalingam's defiance as a challenge and Pirapaharan decided to take the TULF on publicly. Six militants led by Seekan entered the public meeting Amirthalingam was addressing on 8 May at Oddumadam, Jaffna. At that time Amirthalingam was telling his supporters to defy the LTTE ban. One of the LTTE cadres interrupted Amirthalingam and asked: "Tell us what you have achieved in the past 30 years?" Another shouted at the stunned Amirthalingam: "What do you hope to achieve by clinging onto Jayewardene?"

Before Amirthalingam could open his mouth the Tigers fired a few warning shots into the air. The crowd bolted. The speakers on the dais also ran away. Amirthalingam stood alone holding the mike firmly. The Tigers walked to Amirthalingam's car and drove off with it. It was recovered the next day, left abandoned opposite a cemetery, with windscreen smashed and tyres shot and deflated.

The TULF Working Committee on 11 May considered this situation and Amirthalingam was again defiant. He said: "We are not scared of the gun. After all, death comes only once. Let it come now," he challenged. And he added: "I challenge *Thambymar* to take the boycott call to the people. Let the people decide. We are ready to accept the verdict of the people."

Amirthalingam repeated that challenge to the militants and the pledge to honour the verdict of the people in the final campaign meeting held at Ainthumadachanthi in Jaffna on 12 May 1983. Tiger cadres again fired into the air and the poorly attended meeting ended abruptly.

Polling day was peaceful. Shops were closed. Traffic was minimal. Policemen with bored looks maintained low profile foot-patrols. Election officers, in the polling stations, gathered in knots and gossiped to pass away the sultry afternoon. The morning 'rush' of a few voters also had slackened.

The clock struck four at Polling Station Number 25. One more hour to go for polling to close. Seelan, Sellakili and two others parked their bicycles a few meters away from the side wall of Sivapragasa Maha Vidyalayam at Arasady Road in Jaffna. They had rode in doubles, Seelan and Sellakili riding on the bars of the two separate bicycles. Seelan slipped to the front entrance and flung a grenade, killing Private Jayawardene of the Raja Rata Rifles. The other two soldiers ran into the school compound and took up position to fire back. They had suffered minor injuries.

Sellakili ran towards the fallen soldier and snatched his T 56 rifle, the first assault rifle the army lost to the LTTE. Seelan called off the attack and the Tigers rode away on the bicycles on which they had come. Pirapaharan praised Seelan for the perfect job and demonstrated the T 56 to his cadres.

TULF loses Mandate

The election result was a complete wipeout for the TULF. On that date- 18 May 1983- the TULF lost the mandate it had obtained from the Tamil people of the northeast in July 1977. The people, who voted en masse for the TULF in 1977 and reconfirmed their trust in it in the 4 June 1981 District Development Council election, chose to obey the LTTE edict on 18 May 1983.

The election result was a stunning rejection for the TULF. Two years earlier, at the DDC election, it polled over 80 percent of the votes. On 18 May 1983 barely ten percent of the electors defied the LTTE boycott call to cast their votes for the TULF. In the Jaffna Municipal Council election, the only municipal council in the north, 13 percent of the voters voted for the TULF and 86 percent obeyed the LTTE decree. Of the three Town Councils in the Jaffna peninsula the TULF collected 14 percent of the vote in Chavakachcheri; 85 percent of the voters kept away. In the two Town Councils where Pirapaharan wielded considerable influence, Point Pedro and Valvettithurai, the TULF fared very poorly, collecting less than two percent of the votes. The actual figures were: Valvettithurai: TULF two percent, boycott 98 percent. Point Pedro- TULF 0.75 percent, boycott 99 percent.

Militant youth rejoiced at the defeat of the TULF. They said the TULF had lost the mandate it got from the Tamil people in 1977. "The TULF betrayed the trust placed on them by the people. Instead of implementing the pledge they gave the people they ran after the small mercies thrown at them by Jayewardene," commented Kovai Mahesan in *Suthanthiran*. He added: "The mandate to set up the independent state of Tamil Eelam has now passed to Tamil militant groups." Eelaventhan, deputy leader of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front (TELF) went a step further. He said: "Annai Amirthalingam must honour the pledge he gave the people before the election. He must accept the verdict the people had unmistakably given and quit politics. He should permit the militants to carry on." The general feeling among the people was also similar. Opinion interviews conducted by *Eelanadu* yielded similar results. The man on the street felt that the TULF had lost its mandate because the TULF members of Parliament failed to constitute themselves into a constituent assembly and draft and enact a new constitution for Tamil Eelam according to their manifesto on which they had been elected in 1977. "They failed to act in accordance to the mandate the people gave them," was the general thinking of the people. I interviewed Amirthalingam for the *Daily News*. I asked him to assess the main cause for the setback the TULF suffered. He said the TULF were reduced to that position because Jayewardene failed to deliver on the promises he had made to them. "He promised to make the District Development Councils operative but failed to honour it. He did not devolve the powers. He did not provide the finance. What he gave us was a shell. We had nothing to show the people. We had nothing to reply the LTTE criticism," he said. He agreed with what Pirapaharan's leaflet said about blood dripping from the mouth of the state terrorist wolf. "I have told Jayewardene that army's practice of collective reprisal was driving the people into the hands of the militants," he said.

The army "replied" the death of their colleague, Private Jayewardene, while the ballot boxes were being transported to the counting centre at Jaffna Secretariat. Soldiers belonging to the Raja Rata Rifles traveled in army trucks to Kantarmadam, the scene of the LTTE attack, and went on a rampage, setting fire and destroying 64 houses, three mini-buses, nine motor-cars, three motorcycles and more than 36 bicycles. It was a well-planned operation. The government declared a state of emergency at 5:00 p.m., but the rampage continued in the night too. The army high command then withdrew the unit to its base in Anuradhapura. That helped to spread sporadic army violence countrywide.

On May 21, the day after the unit of the Raja Rata Rifles stationed in Jaffna returned to Anuradhapura, two military policemen boarded the Colombo-bound Jaffna mail train when it halted at Anuradhapura and severely assaulted Tamil passengers. Attacks on train passengers continued for about a week. Anti-Tamil posters were put up in Anuradhapura town. Tamils living in other parts of the country came under isolated attacks. A general attitude that Tamils should be collectively punished was emerging among the armed forces and the Sinhala people.

Strong rumours were also afloat, especially in media circles, about a decision taken by the inner cabinet that collective punishment of the Tamil people was the only method to eliminate the Tigers. Athulathmudali is rumoured to have strongly advocated that approach. Athulathmudali, who had taught law for some time in an Israeli university, supported strong-arm approach from the inception. He was for the adoption of the Israeli military strategy developed by the Israeli army. He was

the brain behind the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act.



Lalith Athulathmudali

Jayewardene was scheduled to pay an official visit to Egypt and Rome during 12-27 June. As usual, he wanted to announce some cosmetic gestures that would create a favourable impact on the international community. He wanted to portray an image that he was a thoroughbred democrat and a stern disciplinarian. He ordered the army to take action against the soldiers involved in the reprisal attack by the army on the polling day- 18 May- at Kantharmadam. The army sacked four soldiers of the Raja Rata Rifles charging them with instigation to violence.

Some soldiers expressed their discontent by deserting the army. The army high command interdicted Lt. Col. K. M. S. Perera, the commanding officer of the Raja Rata Rifles, and replaced him with Lt. Col. Cecil Wadyaratne. Five officers and 96 soldiers who criticized this decision were also sacked.

Jayewardene resorted to a political gimmick to establish his credibility as a thoroughbred democrat. He knew he was being widely criticized for extending the life of the 1977 parliament through the 1982 referendum. Though he tried hard to justify his action, he knew that his reputation had been irreparably eroded. He forced the members of parliament of 18 constituencies where the opposition parties polled more votes than his to resign and held by-elections. He contended that in all other electorates voters supported his party, the United National Party.

By-elections for those 18 seats were also held on 18 May and the UNP won in 14 constituencies. The SLFP won three seats and the Mahajana Eksath Perumuna (MEP) one. Jayewardene told the nation and the international community that the by-elections had justified his decision to hold the referendum. The opposition was not happy. SLFP leader Sirimavo Bandaranaike issued a scathing statement that detailed the extent of violence Jayewardene's thugs unleashed on the



Sirimavo Bandaranaike

voters before the elections. SLFP organizers were told under threat of punishment not to leave their houses. SLFP polling agents were chased away from the polling centres.

An atmosphere of violence was gradually being built in the northeast and the south. In the northeast, dissidents from the five major militant groups - the LTTE, PLOT, TELO, EROS and EPRLF - started to operate on their own. Three such groups were engaged in violent activities of a minor nature. They were GUES, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Army (TELA) started by Oberoi Thevan after he split from TELO in 1981 and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Cobras (TELC) which operated in Batticoola. GUES was engaged in forcibly collecting polling cards before the local government election, TELA and TELC were busy placing parcel bombs at public places, burning buses and damaging public property. These violent acts were given wide publicity in the Colombo press and created an adverse impression among the Sinhala people.

Peradenya Attacks

The rumoured decision of the inner cabinet to give collective punishment to the Tamils for daring to challenge the Sinhala leadership, later events reveal, had been passed on to the UNP, especially to its trade union and student wings. Jayewardene, since he assumed the leadership of the UNP, had patiently built up two strong trade unions, the Jathika Seva Sangamaya (JSS) headed by Cyril Mathew and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) led by Gamini Dissanayake. The UNP, which had no significant influence among university students, built its own organization and made use of it to counter the left-oriented unions during the referendum. That resulted in major clashes among university student unions and UNP-led unions received the backing of the forces of the state. That marked a turning point in the history of race relations at Peradeniya University, where a quarter of the students were Tamil-speaking and which had remained insulated from racial controversies and confrontations due to the influence of leftist parties.

The heightening of militant activities in the northeast bred anti- Tamil hatred among sections of the Sinhala students, especially the members of the UNP-led Peradenya Students Union. Some Sinhala students began to cast remarks like "Why are you here? Go to Eelam," "No Campus and no Eelam, you bastards," at Tamil students. The staging of the Tamil translation of Jean-Paul Satre's play 'Men Without Shadows' by a student group annoyed some Sinhala students. The play,

which dealt with the torture and cruelty Nazi soldiers inflicted on French resistance fighters, made the Sinhala students suspect that the Tamil students were impliedly portraying the conditions in Jaffna. A plan was hatched to chase the Tamil students out of Peradeniya University. A confidential report of the inquiry which investigated the attacks on Tamil students, which Rajan Hoole used in his book Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power, a publication of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) gives the purpose of the attack as: "The purpose of the campaign was to evict the Tamils from the Campus. In complete defiance of authority and acting with blatant violence, the attackers succeeded in achieving their ends." The report was prepared by the committee of inquiry headed by Kenneth M. de Lanerolle, Dorai Calnaido and Mrs. T. K. Ekanayake. The provocation for the attack on the Tamil students was the defacing of the Sinhala lettering on the plaque in which the name of the Peradeniya University was written in Sinhala, Tamil and English. The plaque, that stands at the entrance to the university where Galaha Road branches off from the Colombo Road, was defaced in broad light by a group of persons suspected to be from the UNP. Rumours were spread that Tamil students were responsible for that act. Rumours also said that posters containing Tiger and Tamil nationalist slogans were discovered in the rooms of Tamil students.

A group of outsiders went to the university in the evening and threatened the Tamil students, saying that they and their student supporters would teach them a lesson. That night, at about 9.30 p.m., a group of Sinhala students led by Thulsie Wickremesinghe and A. Ekanayake, both fourth year science students from Arunachalam Hall, went to the Science Faculty canteen where a Tamil film was being screened. They dragged out a few male Tamil students, saying some Tamil students had applied paint on the Sinhala letters in the university name board and all Tamil students should bear responsibility. They took the Tamils along with them and forced them to apply tar on Tamil letters on all the name boards from Galaha junction to the Arts Faculty.

This was followed by attacks on the Tamil students in the various halls of residence. The fact that they were all timed to take place at the same time revealed a high level of preparation and coordination. The attackers singled out the first year engineering student P. Balasooriyan and surrounded him, shouting that he was a Tiger. The frightened Balasooriyan jumped out of the window of his first floor room to escape from the yelling crowd and injured himself. He was discovered behind the hall by two of his batch mates, beaten severely and made to kneel holding his palms above his head in worship. The crowd called him a tiger and wanted him to be handed to the police, which the vice-chancellor did the next morning.

The attackers showed the vice-chancellor a bag containing some blocks, rubber stamps and a Tamil magazine which was later produced to the police as proof of his involvement with the Tigers. Investigators found that Balasooriyan was openly editing the magazine *Pudusu* (New) which he started while at Mahajana College, Tellipalai. It was a left-oriented magazine and he went on to join the National Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam founded by Visvanandadevan which was critical of the LTTE. Balasooriyan later migrated to Britain.

Most of the Tamil students and staff left the university in the morning of 12 May and those who decided to stay back were attacked that night. On 13 night they attacked the Tamil students in the Medical Faculty. The protection given to the attackers was such they were bold enough to attack the Tamil students who returned after the university assured their safety. It was only after those attacks that Wickremesinghe and Ekanayake were suspended.

The collective punishment the Jayewardene government inflicted on the Tamils through the army and its student organizations failed to subdue the Tamil community. Instead, it emboldened them. It estranged the Tamil community. And the events in Trincomalee, where I was present when the attack commenced, pained and infuriated the Tamils more. It united them. It was Jayewardene government's present to Pirapaharan.

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Chapter 35. Tamil Blood Boils

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