

Pirapaharan

By: T. Sabaratnam

12. Moderates Ignore Mandate

Opposition Leader

Tamils of the north and east of Sri Lanka had declared “**their will to exist as a separate entity ruling themselves in their own territory**” since the Kankesanthurai by-election held on 6 February 1975. As Thanthai Chelva declared in his victory speech, the Tamils had clearly expressed their will.

They affirmed that decision in the historic Vaddukoddai Convention of 14 May 1976 and ratified it in the 21 July 1977 parliamentary election. Four months before that ratification, on 21 February 1977, Thanthai Chelva categorically told a meeting convened by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike that the TULF would not compromise its stand on a separate state. Amirthalingam in his victory speech on July 22 categorically affirmed Thanthai Chelva’s firm stand. He said:

“We will march forward to achieve the goal of Eelam.”

Seven days after giving that solid assurance the TULF leadership decided to ditch it. The TULF had emerged the biggest opposition party and the post of Leader of the Opposition automatically fell in its lap. It did not want to lose it. The party was prepared to delay the march towards Eelam for the sake of that post. The informal decision to accept the Opposition Leader post was made on July 23 when the full results of the election was known. The decision was made in Jaffna when Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam, Kathirvetpillai, Yugeswaran and Anandasangari met at the party office.

“We should not miss this golden opportunity,” Kathirvetpillai insisted.

Amirthalingam was reluctant. He was worried about the reaction of the boys. He said: “We must be mindful of the reaction of the boys.” ‘Pediyangal’ was the word he used to denote ‘boys’ and not the usual ‘Paiyangal’.

Sivasithamparam said: “They will shout for a few days and then quieten down.”

The formal decision to accept the post was made on 30 July when the TULF parliamentary group met at the Vavuniya Town Hall. Amirthalingam was elected the leader of the parliamentary group and Sivasithamparam its deputy leader. The decision to accept the post of the Leader of the Opposition was taken after that. There was no discussion on that matter. The group unanimously decided to accept that post.

The youths revolted. The TULF Youth Front issued a statement condemning the decision of the parliamentary group and charged the members of parliament of going back on the mandate given to them. It urged the parliamentary group to constitute itself into a National Assembly of Tamil Eelam, as promised in the election manifesto, to draft, adopt and implement a constitution for the state of Tamil Eelam.



Kathirvetpillai replied in a statement on behalf of the parliamentary group. He said that the parliamentary group would use parliament as a forum to canvas for the separate state. Amirthalingam, in an interview to Reuters, added two reasons for their decision. The post gave an opportunity for the Tamils to carry their message to the four corners of the world. It also gave access to important persons and institutions in the globe.

The decision of the parliamentary group, which met at Thondaman's office on August 3, to attend the ceremonial opening of parliament the next day provoked the youths further. The decision taken that day to go slow with the demand for a separate state and give the new prime minister, Jayewardene, time to tackle the Tamil problem irked the youths the most.

The TULF attended parliament on 4 August morning to elect the Speaker and Amirthalingam occupied the seat of the Leader of the Opposition. The TULF MPs took oaths affirming their allegiance to the 1972 constitution and participated in the election of the Speaker. R. Premadasa, who would later become prime minister, proposed the name of Anandatissa de Alwis and Opposition Leader Amirthalingam seconded. Premadasa and Amirthalingam led de Alwis to the Speaker's chair. Amirthalingam told the Speaker the TULF would cooperate with him to maintain the decorum of the House and help him to conduct the affairs of Parliament efficiently.

In the evening, the TULF attended the ceremonial opening of parliament, ending the 20-year boycott which was started in 1957 as a protest against the enactment of the Sinhala Only law. The Jayewardene government responded to the TULF gesture by incorporating verbatim the section "Problems of the Tamil Speaking People" contained in the UNP election manifesto in the "Statement of Government Policy." To soothe the feelings of the revolting youth Amirthalingam issued a statement on 7 August highlighting this.

Jayewardene rewarded Amirthalingam by providing respectability to the post of the Leader of the Opposition. He was provided an official residence, police security, official car and a secretariat. Jayewardene, an acknowledged master political tactician, was implementing his clever scheme to draw Amirthalingam and the TULF away from its commitment to a separate state. He was trying to make Amirthalingam live in cooperation with the Sinhalese.

Tamil youths saw through this scheme. Their opposition to the TULF leadership, for the first time, turned against Amirthalingam. They pasted Jaffna walls with the slogan:

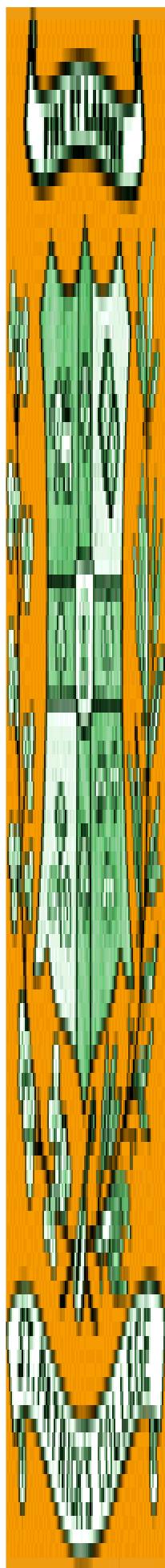
***Keddathu Thamil Eelam
Kidaiththau Ethir Kadchi Thalaivar Patavi***

The meaning of the slogan: We asked for Thamil Eelam, but got the Opposition Leader post. They also issued leaflets accusing the TULF of betraying the trust the Tamil people had placed in it. One of the leaflets headlined: What happened to the National Assembly of Thamil Eelam? and asked the TULF hierarchy to implement the mandate the people had given it.

Police on Rampage

As the youths stepped up their ‘war’ against the TULF parliamentary group Jaffna peninsula witnessed the first ugly police rampage in its history. It started as a minor incident. It is customary among Sri Lankan police to travel in buses and enter carnivals without buying tickets. On 12 August a group of policemen in plain-clothes went to the carnival held at St. Patrick’s College.





The carnival was held by the Rotary Club of Jaffna to collect funds to build a cancer hospital in Jaffna. The men at the gate refused the police entry until they bought tickets. After an argument, the police bought their tickets, went to the bar, had a few drinks, came back, and assaulted the ticket collectors. Dr. Phillips, one of the organizers, reported the incident to higher police officers and requested them to prevent police constables going to the carnival.

On the next day, August 13, policemen from other stations in the Jaffna peninsula went to the carnival, drank heavily and clashed with the public. Members of the public chased away the police, who were not in uniform. Police retaliated the next morning, August 14. The policemen got out of their stations and attacked the public. They stopped cyclists, assaulted them and made them to carry the cycles. At Puttur, three policemen stopped three boys riding bicycles, one boy pulled out a revolver from his pocket and shot at a policeman, injuring him in the thigh.

The next morning, August 15, policemen from the Jaffna police station went on a shooting spree. They killed four civilians and injured 21 others. They told the media that they opened fire because some men resisted when they tried to seize the arms carried by some boys. Jaffna Member of Parliament V. Yogeswaran, complained about the incident to the police headquarters in Colombo, but the attacks on the public continued,

Policemen repeated the attack on 16 August. They went in a truck and set shops ablaze. Then, on August 17 morning policemen from Jaffna police station set fire to the Jaffna market. A portion of the market and adjoining shops were gutted. Two persons were shot dead.

Amirthalingam, who was in Colombo when the incident began, rushed to Jaffna on 17 August night and visited the Jaffna market on 18 August morning. He saw the Assistant Superintendent of Police standing there and went up to him, identified himself, and asked in anger, "Why are you people shooting the innocent people?" The police officer scolded Amirthalingam in filth and the constable standing behind him hit him with the butt of his gun.

The riots spread to the south. Sinhala students from the Jaffna Campus instigated the riots and the police did not take any action to prevent it. Jaffna Campus had admitted a small quota of Sinhala students since its inception in 1964 to promote Sinhala-Tamil understanding. The Sinhalese students were not happy because of the distance, climate and unfamiliar social environment. They felt they were foreigners in a totally different linguistic, religious and cultural environment. They tried their best to get a transfer to a university campus close to their homes, to Colombo, Peradeniya, Vidyothaya or Vidyalankara. In addition, in 1977, there were some personal problems for some students. Sinhala students had teased a Tamil female student. Her relatives had assaulted them. The Sinhala students made use of the riots to get back home. They said it was unsafe for them to live in Jaffna because of the heightened tension there.

They were transported with police escort in special buses to Anuradhapura on 17 August. When the convoy of buses stopped at the Anuradhapura bus stand, some of the students leaders got on the bus hood and told the crowd there that Tamils were attacking the Sinhalese in Jaffna. The enraged mob went berserk. That ignited riots in Anuradhapura. Tamil shops, houses and even the Hindu temple were looted and torched. Tamils were attacked. Police turned a blind eye. They chased away the Tamils who ran to the police station seeking shelter. They treated the Tamils as their enemies. The

riots spread to Kurunegala, Matale and Polonnaruwa on 18 August, to Kandy and other areas in the hill country during the day on 19 August.

Amirthalingam returned to Colombo on the morning of 19 August and raised the Jaffna incidents in parliament as an adjournment motion. Speaking in the debate on the adjournment motion he said, "...police aimed their gun at me. I am lucky to be here today. The men were in uniform but wore no numbers. When I asked them why they shot innocent persons the policemen abused me in filth and assaulted me."

Some UNP lawmakers asked Amirthalingam to repeat the filthy words used by the policemen.

"No, Mr. Speaker. I will not repeat those mean, vulgar words in this esteemed chamber. Those words are unparliamentary."

Amirthalingam gave a detailed account of the incidents in Jaffna and blamed the police for those incidents. Then he pointedly asked the Prime Minister, "Can you rule the country with policemen like this?"

Jayewardene replied: We were at the receiving end of police action not long ago."

Replying in the adjournment debate Jayewardene denied Amirthalingam's accusation with anger. He adverted to the Puttur shooting and said the 'boys' had the audacity to shoot at the police. He accused Amirthalingam of promoting secessionism and thundered amid applause from the UNP parliamentarians:

"People become restive when they hear that a separate state is to be formed, that Trincomalee is to be the capital of the state, that Napoleon said that Trincomalee was key to the Indian Ocean and that it is going to be the capital of the state. I do not think Napoleon ever said that - I do not think Napoleon ever made a foolish remark like that. Whatever it is, when statements of that type are made, the newspapers carry them throughout the island, and when you say that you are not violent, but that violence may be used in time to come, what do you think the other people in Sri Lanka will do? How will they react? If you want to fight, let there be a fight; if it is peace, let there be peace; that is what they will say. It is not what I am saying. The people of Sri Lanka say that."

Jayawardene was not repentant about the violence and tension that made thousands of Tamils flee their homes. He only promised to appoint a commission of inquiry.

After Jayawardene's angry speech violence spread to Colombo, Panadura and Kalutara on 19 August night. Sinhala mobs gathered at junctions and attacked Tamil shops and business establishments in the presence of the police. Unlike in 1958, this time they went in search of Tamil houses, attacked the inhabitants, looted them and burned them. Mobs also destroyed Hindu kovils [temples].

The government clamped a 35- hour curfew at 5 P.M. on 20 August and deployed the army and the navy to quell the riots. The curfew hours were restricted to the night from 22 August and the curfew's duration was gradually reduced thereafter and lifted on 30 August. The *Daily News* of 29 August gave the official figures as 112 Tamils killed, 25,000 rendered homeless and Rs, 1000 million worth of property destroyed. Independent sources gave the number killed as 300, refugees as 30,000 and 300 temples damaged or destroyed. The government set up several refugee camps and

chartered three ships to transport the refugees to safety in the north and the east.

The riots angered the Tamil public and youths and there were whispered threats to the Sinhala people living in Jaffna. Though there were no attacks on the Sinhalese, some of whom were settled in Jaffna for generations, they sought refuge at the police stations. The police opened refugee camps for them at the Sinhala Maha Vidyalaya and Naga Vihara.

The riot provoked indignation in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu Assembly expressed “rude shock” and requested Prime Minister Morarji Desai



to depute a cabinet minister to Sri Lanka to investigate the violence. Desai, who had a soft corner for Jayewardene, asked the Indian Foreign Ministry to express India's concern to Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in Delhi. In Madras the DMK staged a mammoth demonstration of support for Sri Lankan Tamils and handed a memorandum to the Sri Lanka's Deputy High Commissioner.

The 1977 riots was a turning point in Sinhala-Tamil relations. The riots had varied and far reaching consequences. They can be summed up as:

- **Tamils, particularly the youths, lost their faith in Jayewardene.**
- **Tamils lost their faith in the Sri Lankan Police. They had become the Sinhala Police.**
- **The faith in a separate state had been reinforced.**
- **The Tamil homeland, the land to which Tamils were sent, had become a real need.**
- **Tamil moderates, particularly Amirthalingam, had been weakened. Armed militant groups had won respectability.**
- **Pirapaharan's slogan, 'Hit back', had grown popular.**
- **Tamil Nadu and India had been drawn in.**

Moderates under Attack

Tamil moderates were the worst sufferers. Tamil youths were incensed with Jayewardene's defence of the police and his war cry. Militants issued a leaflet in which they declared their readiness for a fight. If Jayewardene wants to fight, the militants were prepared for it, the leaflet said.

Youths who suffered indignity during the riots were also itching for a fight. They were angry that they were attacked by Sinhala mobs because they were Tamils. Some of them joined the two active militant groups, Thangathurai's group and Pirapaharan's group. The government's intelligence outfit, the Colombo Bureau of Intelligence (CBI) estimated that in September the number of cadres in both groups had risen from 30 to 50

and sympathizers from 100 to 200. Public sympathy also shifted towards the militant groups.

The militants' immediate pressure was against the TULF leadership, especially against Amirthalingam. He was told to take a tough stand against the government. The TULF leadership had no alternative but to fall in line. When the Government Policy Statement was debated in the first week of September the TULF moved an amendment regretting the failure of the government to mention the mandate the TULF had obtained to establish a separate state of Tamil Eelam. This amendment provoked the UNP parliamentarians who accused Amirthalingam of making inflammatory speeches. Mahaweli Development Minister Gamini Dissanayake was very harsh on Amirthalingam. He blamed Amirthalingam for being "double-faced and forked-tongued," showing a sweet face in the south and a hideous one in the north. He said Amirthalingam's provocative speeches had incited the Sinhala people.

Later that month, on 22 September, Jayewardene moved a resolution in parliament to empower the Speaker to appoint a select committee and chairman to "consider the revision of the constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka and other written laws as the committee may consider." The resolution was adopted the next day. Amirthalingam, yielding to the pressure of the youths, announced on that day the TULF's decision to boycott the functions in which ministers participated and to keep out of the deliberations of the Select Committee on the Revision of the Constitution. Jayewardene was annoyed. He was anxious to become the executive president on 4 February 1978 and wanted to show the world that the main opposition party, the TULF, was with him. By this action, he wanted to neutralize the opposition of Sirimavo Bandaranaike's SLFP.

The composition of the select committee was announced on 3 November. The committee did not contain a representative of the TULF, but CWC leader S. Thondaman joined. The committee consisted of J R Jayewardene - chairman, R Premadasa, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Disanayaka, Ronnie de Mel, K W Devanayakam, M H M Naina Marikar, all from the UNP, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Maitripala Senanayake from the SLFP and Thondaman, of the CWC.

Jayewardene organized a virulent media campaign against the TULF, focused on Amirthalingam. With Lake House, Sri Lanka's biggest publishing house, Rupavahini (television) and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (radio) under his control Jayewardene had at his disposal a powerful propaganda machine. Though he campaigned for media freedom while in the opposition, he made use of the state-controlled media outfit efficiently and effectively from the moment he assumed office. He appointed his former private secretary, Ranapala Bodinagoda, as Lake House chairman and controlled the press through him. Bodinagoda made it his routine to go to Jayewardene's private residence at Ward Place on his way to Lake House. He, along with the chairmen of Rupavahini and SLBC, planned the media campaign as directed by Jayewardene. From the beginning of his rule Jayewardene's main targets were Amirthalingam and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Amirthalingam to be 'cut to size' and Sirimavo to be removed from the political arena. The campaign against Amirthalingam was to portray him as a monster stroking the separatist fire by secretly backing the militants' acts of violence.

Amirthalingam was under attack from both sides. I did an interview with him on his plight for the *Daily News* on 5 October 1977, just after he made a statement in parliament. He told parliament the boycott of the constitution drafting process did not mean the TULF opposed the presidential form of

government. It only meant that Tamil people were not worried whether Jayewardene ruled the country as prime minister or president. “When our house is on fire, can we worry about the colour and texture of the window curtains?” he asked.

In the interview, Amirthalingam told me he was in the position of the drum and was being beaten on both sides. “Boys think that I am on Jayewardene’s side and are beating me. Jayewardene thinks that I am with the boys and is beating me.” Then he told me in confidence: J. R. (Jayewardene) is the most dangerous of the two, a revengeful man. If we rub him hard on the wrong side he will destroy the Tamils.”

Amirthalingam’s assessment of the revengeful character of Jayewardene was not something new. In the early 1950s, Sir John Kotelawala called Jayewardene “a serpent under the grass.” Sirimavo Bandaranaike had repeatedly called him a revengeful man and had suffered at his hands. Tamils accuse him of engineering the 1977 riots. They charge that he wanted to weaken the Tamil race because he was disgraced by the Jaffna public.

The incident in which he was disgraced occurred during the 1977 election campaign. Jayewardene went to Jaffna to address a UNP election campaign. A temporary stage had been put up on the esplanade, next to Duraiappah Stadium. As Jayewardene got up to address the meeting, the stage crashed, causing pandemonium. Jayewardene and others on the stage fell down. The meeting was abandoned and Jayewardene took it as an insult.

The sabotage was the work of EROS and some of the boys who caused the stage to crash are now with the EPDP in Colombo. They told me they stood around the stage and cut the coir rope used to tie the poles on which planks of timber were placed.

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**Chapter 13. Militants to the Fore
Will be posted on: October 6, 2003**

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