

# No `united' in TULF

FOUR Tamil political parties - the Federal Party, Tamil Congress, Ceylon Workers' Congress and the Adangath Thamilar Ottumai Munnani of C. Sundaralingam - along with some prominent Tamil individuals came together in 1971 to form the Tamil United Front or TULF in 1971. The political midwife who assisted in this birth was Gnanamoorthy of Velvettithurai, a periyappah of Velupillai Prabhakaran and ardent Tamil nationalist. The TUF functioned as a loose coalition first. Even K. W. Devanayagam of the UNP attended some of the earlier TUF meetings in the interests of Tamil unity.

The inclusion of the ultra conservative maverick Sundara-lingam proved a liability as the so-called Tamil minority or depressed castes did not want to have anything to do with an outfit that had the adangath Thamilar as a leader. This was because of Sundaralingam's orthodox views on caste. So Sundaralingam was gently eased out with former parliamentarian Dharmalingam telling Sundaralingam publicly, "Sattre vilagiyirum pillai! Sannithanam maraikkuthu", meaning, "Plea-se move aside. You are blocking the view of the sanctum sanctorum!" This was a repetition of what Lord Shiva is supposed to have told his vehicle, the nandikeswarar or crouched bull when the untouchable saint Nandanar tried to worship at the holy temple of Chidambaram.

In 1976 the TUF added the word `liberation' and became Tamil United Liberation Front or TULF. Chelvanayagam, Ponnambalam and Thondaman were joint leaders or panguth-thalaivergal and the Amirthalingam-Sivasithambaram duo executive administrators or seyalthibargal. The new party concretised into a formal structure and adopted the revolutionary credo of demanding a sovereign, socialist secular state of Tamil Eelam. Thondaman and the CWC dissociated themselves from the front immediately saying their party based in the highlands could not support such a provision. G.G Ponnambalam himself never participated at a TULF meeting although he did make his mark at the famous trial at bar charging Amirthalingam of sedition.

The 1977 general elections saw more fissures as Kumar Ponnambalam and some other congressmen like Motilal Nehru, Kumaraswamy, Sivaganam etc broke away from TULF ranks and contested as independents. Tamil Congress stalwarts like the two Siva-sithambarams, Anandasangari, Thirunavukkarasu and Rajah Visvanathan functioned as TULF. In Batticaloa a major split occurred with the poet Kasi Anandan contesting against veteran politician Rajadurai. Kasi Anandan with the tacit backing of Amirthalingam contested under the Federal Party symbol of the house against the official TULF candidate Rajadurai. The present Batticaloa MP P. Joseph as he was known then backed Rajadurai. After elections the Tamil Congress under Kumar Ponnambalam obtained separate accreditation and continued as the official Tamil Congress.

In 1978 the TULF had a convention at Aavarankaal in Puttur where M. Sivasithampram was elected as TULF president. A. Amirthalingam was thalaivar. Siva would address Amir as "Inathin thalaivar": (leader of the community), while Amir would reciprocate by addressing Siva as "Iyakkathin thalaivar": (leader of the movement.) Three serious divisions occurred within the 1977-83 period.

Pottuvil MP M. Canagaret-nam crossed over to the UNP in December 1977. In 1979 Chelliah Rajadurai crossed over to the government and was appointed regional development minister. The new constitution itself was amended to facilitate this crossover from opposition to government ranks. This led to a considerable number of eastern province TULF members splitting with the TULF to follow their leaders.

The TULF youth and student wings became restive and restless. Unhappy with what they saw as political dilly-dallying by the leaders, the youth leaders began turning radical. Umamaheswaran and Santha-thiyar

who controlled the youth to a great extent went over completely to militant ranks and formed the PLOTE. So too did many other lesser known TULF youth activists who began joining various Tamil militant groups. Others like Muthuku-maraswamy, Pushparajan and Varatharajapperumal opted out but did not join any other movement then.

The third fissure was over the TULF accepting the district development councils of the UNP. A significant section led by the son of S. J. V. Chelvana-yagam, Chandrahasan, rebelled against this. These sections formed the Tamil Eelam Liberation Front or TELF. Former Jaffna MP Yogeswaran's uncle Dr. Tharamalingam became TELF president. Suthanthiran editor Kovai Mehsan and Eelaventhan became the secretaries. The TULF mouthpiece Suthanthiran was converted into an effective anti-TULF organ. The Saturday Review of Sivanayagam also backed the TELF. Chandrahasan while being in the TULF was in reality of the TELF. Leaders like Katharavepillai and Thanga-thurai also clandestinely supported the TELF. Youth activists like Senthoo Rajan, Iraikumaran, Ponrajah etc supported the TELF. If the 1983 violence did not happen the TELF may have made serious inroads into the TULF constituency.

After 1983 the TULF hierarchy relocated to Madras. The killing of Aalaalasundram and Dharmalingam by the TELO saw TULF activities cease in the north-east. Tiruchelvam and Soosaithadasan kept the TULF alive in Colombo. Later the LTTE decimated a substantial number of TULF leaders at an upper and middle level in the north-east. Other militant Tamil groups also did this to a lesser extent. Other TULF persons defected to militant ranks. Thus an effective presence of the TULF was eradicated in the north-east.

1989 saw the original TULF grouping with other Tamil parties like the EPRLF, ENDLF, TELO etc under an umbrella configuration called the TULF. This was at the behest of India. The Tamil groups stabbed the original TULF persons by tampering with the electioneering process. A substantial portion of the original TULF constituency enraged by TULF association with the perceived 'Quisling' groups of India voted for the EROS independents. This happened in a big way in Trincomalee and Jaffna. So the original TULF found itself without any MPs. Amirthalingam made it to parliament on the national list.

1994 saw the armed forces clearing the east and ensuring a reasonably free and fair election. The TULF sun arose in the east. Three members from Batticaloa and one from Trincomalee were elected. Another was appointed on the national list. The personal popularity of Joseph Pararajasingham was said to be a crucial factor in the TULF renaissance. He demanded and obtained parliamentary group leader status although in terms of seniority it should have gone to Thanga-thurai. There was also much ugly infighting before Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam was appointed as national list MP.

The TULF began to play a constructive role in the constitutional reform exercise. Political circles described the draft constitution as a 'Peiris-Tiruchelvam constitution'. This has led to a lot of controversy - much of it unwarranted.

The ongoing war also led to much flak against the TULF. The party sought to deflect some criticism by voting against the extension of emergency in parliament. The TULF proved a point by this in the sense that the government was not dependent upon TULF support to prolong the emergency. Ironically the bitter critic of the TULF on this is the EPDP organ, Thina-murasu controlled by EPDP parliamentarian Atputharajah alias Ramesh. The EPDP including Ramesh regularly vote for extending the emergency while criticising the TULF.

It soon became clear that the TULF was being fragmented into three main groupings. One was the pro-constitutional reform exercise faction to which Sivasithamparam, Tiruchelvam, Sambandan and Anandasangari belong. The second was the Batticaloa component led by Joseph Pararajasingham that has a lot of reservations about this. The third was a grouping with mixed feelings led up to the time of his death by Thangathurai. Today Mavai Senathirajah is the most prominent in this grouping.

The feelings of the Batticaloa component assumes great significance as the renaissance of the TULF is very much a result of overwhelming eastern support. In fact the TULF is in reality an eastern Tamil party right now. Both Selvarajah and the other Batticaloa MP, Thurairajasingham, toe the line set by Joseph Pararajasingham publicly although they grumble against him privately. The attitude of the Batticaloa TULF is conditioned greatly by existential realities.

The withdrawal of a great number of troops from the east for deployment in the north has depleted security forces strength greatly in the east. The LTTE on the other hand has stepped up its recruitment. The abdication of territory by the armed forces has led to the LTTE gaining de facto control of nearly 80% of the landmass in the east. It also exercises considerable covert influence in the so called army controlled territory.

The LTTE has also been systematically assassinating a number of Tamil militant members in the east. Many of them were members of local authorities. No TULF member has been killed in Batticaloa so far, but the killing of Thangathurai in Trincomalee has sent a chilling message. Apart from the fear of danger at the hands of the LTTE, there is also the important question of public opinion too.

The large scale human rights violations committed by the armed forces in Batticaloa have been documented to a very great extent. Pararajasingham himself has done so considerably. There is the day to day harassment of civilians in the name of security also. Another point is the corruption by sections of the armed forces and police. Adding to these woes is the behaviour of other Tamil groups collaborating with the army. Abductions and extortion is almost a way of life. All this has led to a groundswell of resentment against the government and its agents. Corresponding to this is a growth in covert support to the LTTE. As Pararajasingham has often pointed out he is merely reflecting the views of his constituents who are in the final analysis pro-LTTE and anti-state.

Complicating matters further is the iron grip exerted by the LTTE on the TULF in Batticaloa. Three cases in point relate to the three TULF members of parliament. The first is about Selvarajah or 'Selvarajah master.' He apparently ignored a chit brought by a constituent from the local Tiger leader recommending a 'favour' being done. Later some Tigers came to the vicinity of Selvarajah's residence and exploded a grenade. They also fired shots in the air opposite the house of a close relative of Selvarajah's. The message was clear.

Thurairajasingham was interviewed by the BBC. This was after the Tigers had fired some long range artillery causing damage to civilians. Thurairajasingham mildly reprimanded the LTTE saying that the "younger brothers should be more careful and considerate." The LTTE immediately demanded his resignation from parliament. A terrified Thurairajasingham ran off to Colombo. He then went abroad to Britain for some weeks until Pararajasingham managed to cool the local LTTE. It is not entirely an accident that both Selvarajah and Thurairajasingham vacate Batticaloa whenever Pararajasingham goes abroad. They seem fearful of interacting with the LTTE in the absence of Joseph's fraternal benevolence.

Joseph Pararajasingham has been described as a man close to the LTTE. Some even call him an unofficial spokesperson of the LTTE. It is obvious that Pararajasingham reflects the LTTE viewpoint quite extensively. Sometimes this is at the expense of the TULF viewpoint. Ye he too is not immune from LTTE threats. Once Pararajasingham and wife Sugunam went to the university at Vandarumoolai where the undergrads with clandestine LTTE backing were demonstrating. When Pararajasingham addressed the undergrads, he was heckled. When the Pararajasinghams were about to return some undergrads handed over a petition to them. An irate Sugunam Pararajasingham, angry over her husband being heckled, tore up the petition in public. Because of a traffic jam caused by demonstrating students their vehicle had progressed only a few yards in many minutes when two Tiger operatives approached them. Their order was curt and crisp. Karikalan the LTTE area leader wanted to meet Joseph. A panic stricken Sugunam also insisted on accompanying her husband. They met Karikalan at Thigi-lavettuvaan. Both were reticent about what happened. The whole of Batticaloa was alarmed at what happened. Later Pararajasingham pooh poohed the whole thing saying it was

only a friendly meeting with the LTTE. But those close to the Pararajasinghams know the very real danger that lurked on that day.

On another occasion students of St. Michael's College, Batticaloa, staged a powerful demonstration against Pararaja-singham when a new building block at the college was to be named after him. The building contractors were close relatives of Sugunam Pararajasingham. The students objected to a politician's name being given to the building, rightfully stating that an educationist's name was more proper. The students erased the inscription bearing Pararajasingham's name. Again it was clear that the LTTE was sending a message to Pararaja-singham through this. No major demonstration is possible in the Tamil areas without some form of 'armed' backing, LTTE or otherwise.

It is against this background that Pararajasingham's recent trip to the USA, Canada and Europe should be viewed. Intelligence reports received in Colombo indicate that Pararaja-singham openly consorted with LTTE activists there. He attended many receptions and meetings organised by the LTTE in those countries. He gave interviews to LTTE controlled radios and journals. At meetings with foreign officials and dignitaries, he openly espoused a Tiger point of view. The Tamil fortnightly Sarinigar reported recently that a lecture delivered by Pararajasingham at a meeting of a council of refugees on the human rights situation of Batticaloa was blatantly onesided.

Sri Lankan intelligence authorities are perturbed about the 'lionisation' of Pararajasingham by the Tigers overseas. It is correct that the LTTE overseas lobby cultivated Pararajasingham extensively and tried to encourage him to part company with the current TULF leadership and promote an active LTTE line. In fairness to Pararajasingham he declined or evaded the issue by saying that his loyalty to Sivasithamparam and the party was absolute. Although Pararajasingham lapped up LTTE attention overseas it was more of a desperate attempt to ingratiate himself with the LTTE rather than engaging in an anti-party conspiracy.

Pararajasingham is not foolish enough to go overboard into supporting the LTTE completely. He knows there can be no political future for him then. It is clear that the shrewd politico has no illusions about the LTTE but knows that physical survival is essential to build up a political future. That is why he has been trying very hard to reconcile the TULF with the LTTE. This is quite understandable and acceptable under the circumstances. What is clear is that there is a very genuine strand of opinion within the eastern TULF that some accommodation has to be arrived at with the LTTE and that confronting the Tigers should be avoided at all costs.

This line of thought is fortified by the close kinship of TULF members and LTTE cadres in the east. Both organisations have their roots in a strong Tamil nationalist base in the region. As such it is inevitable that members of the same family are active in both the LTTE and the TULF. Only the criterion of age may be differentiating. An example is the fact that Trincomalee TULF branch president Eelathu Nathan is a brother in law of the Trincomalee LTTE leader and commander of the Charles Anthony Infantry brigade, Sornam. The system of kudi or clan among the castes of Mukkuvar, Karasiyar and Seervatha in the east is another bond clasping LTTE and TULF. An open rupture between the TULF and the LTTE in the east is fraught with dire consequences.

So when the Batticaloa branch of the TULF resolves unanimously that it is against any re-demarcation of the eastern province it is only echoing LTTE sentiment. When it resolves that any possible political settlement should be discussed with the LTTE and accepted only after it approves of it, the branch is only reflecting the dominant line of thought among its membership. What it doesn't realise is that by this they are abdicating their political role to the LTTE. There can be no rationale for TULF existence if the LTTE is to be the sole decision maker.

Other problems surfacing are the resentment and feeling of betrayal by the Tamils of Amparai district. These Tamils long standing supporters of the Federal Party and later the TULF are not in favour of going under a Muslim dominated council. Mavai Senathirajah who contested the Amparai district under the TULF symbol in 1994 has kept away from politburo meetings and written letters to the press criticising the TULF leadership on this count.

The Trincomalee branch which earlier objected to re-demarcating the east has modified its earlier stance now and objects merely to the holding of a referendum at this stage. After Sambandan became MP, the Trincomalee branch has mellowed greatly and lost much of its stridency exerted mainly against the former MP Arunasalam Thangathurai who was ruthlessly murdered in July.

Another cross current within the TULF is the declared intention of its national list MP Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam to resign his parliamentary seat after the current constitution exercise is concluded satisfactorily. Tiruchelvam has involved himself with idealistic fervour in this political exercise. He staked his claim for the seat and obtained it in 1994 only for the purpose of participating with authority in the constitutional deliberations. All perks and allowances entitled by him as MP have been utilised by the party and not by him. Persons close to Tiruchelvam say that his current involvement in politics at grave risk to his person is only because of a sense of commitment to a negotiated settlement to the crisis. Tiruchelvam hopes to follow his legal and academic interests after bidding adieu to active politics.

Whatever the differences within the TULF, the redeeming grace is that the party has an underlying thread of democratic values. Even Pararajasingham and Sambandan despite their personal differences are in essence party men. Thus despite internal differences the TULF may be able to patch up these in the future.

The stature of the much respected M. Sivasithamparam who is the elder statesman among Sri Lankan Tamils is an important factor. As in the case of `Periyavar' Chelvanayagam, Siva `Aiya' too is capable of sorting out a tricky problem by sheer weight of his personality if the occasion warrants it. Another important consideration is that the current differences within the party are about the unit and not substance of devolution. Thus these differences may be resolved after perhaps bitter bickering in the inner party meetings. It must be realised that the whole party is stricken with the fear of the LTTE after the killing of Thangathurai.

The constitutional reform exercise expected to be a unifying experience is working to the contrary right now. Every major party is facing internal conflict as a result. The TULF too is facing a crisis of unity in this regard. There is no `united' in the Tamil United Liberation Front. All persons desirous of democratic values being instilled into the Tamil polity again can only hope that the party would have the resilience to surmount this latest challenge to its unity.