

# Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students

## AT A GLANCE

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## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** 1975

**Disbanded:** 1990.

**First Major Attack:** January 28, 1984: EROS detonated a bomb at the Hotel Oberoi in Colombo where the government was holding a meeting to discuss future negotiations with Tamil militant groups (unknown casualties).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Major Attack:** April 21, 1987: A car bomb exploded in a major market in Colombo. It is believed that the LTTE collaborated with EROS to execute this attack (113 killed, 200+ wounded).<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS) was one of the original separatist groups in Sri Lanka fighting for an independent Tamil state. EROS was founded in 1975 and acted initially as a think-tank researching Tamil issues. Soon thereafter, its leaders established ties with terrorist groups in the Middle East and Africa, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the African National Congress (ANC). EROS also organized the first terrorist training camps in Sri Lanka. EROS was the least violent and militarily active of the Tamil militant groups of the 1980s, although the group was responsible for a series of bombings in the mid-1980s and the kidnapping of a British journalist. As other Tamil groups began to emerge, EROS slowly lost its influence in the community. Eventually, the majority of EROS members defected to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). EROS ceased to be a militant movement when Shankar Rajee formed the EROS political party.

## NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), also referred to as the Eelam Revolutionary Organizers, was one of the original Tamil militant groups fighting for an independent Tamil homeland in northern Sri Lanka. Founded in London in 1975, the Marxist group emerged as one of the “Big Five” Tamil groups in the 1980s due, in part, to Indian assistance. The other “Big Five” groups were the LTTE, TELO, EROS, and PLOTE. Of these groups, EROS was the smallest and least radical.

In the mid-1970s, EROS established close ties with other revolutionary groups, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and African National Congress (ANC). A number of EROS and LTTE operatives traveled to Lebanon during this period to train at PLO camps. By 1976, the group had cooperated with the LTTE on a number of initiatives, and the two groups frequently trained together at the same sites. In 1979, a faction of the group broke away to form the EPRLF, due to internal disagreements between the group’s London-based and Jaffna-based leadership.

In 1983, the group developed ties with RAW, the external unit of the Indian Intelligence Services. Towards the end of 1985, the group, along with TELO, PLOTE, and EPRLF, began to decline as they succumbed to pressure from the Indian government to downscale their operations and attacks by the LTTE. After the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPK) in 1990, a large faction of EROS broke away to join the LTTE, effectively disbanding the group. From there, EROS transitioned into a minor political party and several of its members were elected to the Sri Lankan parliament in 1989.

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP

Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy, Shankar Rajee, and Velupillai Balakumar founded the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS) in London on January 3, 1975. These three men were from the Karaiyar caste.<sup>3</sup>

**Velupillai Balakumar** (January 3, 1975 to 1990): Velupillai Balakumar, also known as Balakumaran was one of the leaders and co-founders of EROS. Following the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1990, Balakumar split from EROS to join the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) along with his supporters.<sup>4</sup> Balakumar was believed to be a close advisor to Prabhakaran, the former leader of the LTTE. Balakumar is also famous for his strict Marxist beliefs. Balakumar was briefly involved in politics and served for a short period as a member of Sri Lanka’s parliament.<sup>5</sup> His current status is unknown. Following the military’s defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the Sri Lankan government reported that Balakumar, along with other senior LTTE commanders, had been taken into government custody.<sup>6</sup>

**Shankar Rajee** (January 3, 1975 to May 11, 2005): Shankar Rajee, one of the original co-founders of EROS, was the leader of the groups' military wing and developed links with several revolutionary groups, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and former Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.<sup>7</sup> He also served as the leader of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), a group that split off from EROS in 1979.<sup>8</sup> Rajee died in 2005.<sup>9</sup>

**Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy** (January 3, 1975 to December 12, 2006): Ratnasabapathy was a Tamil activist and influential Sri Lankan Marxist thinker. In 1975, Ratnasabapathy, Balakumar, and Rajee founded EROS in Ratnasabapathy's London apartment.<sup>10</sup> In 1989, Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy and 12 other EROS members joined the Sri Lankan parliament for a brief period, although Ratnasabapathy later resigned.<sup>11</sup> Ratnasabapathy died in late 2006.

## **B. NAME CHANGES**

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

## **C. SIZE ESTIMATES**

- 1986: 1,750 cadres (Furtado 2007)<sup>12</sup>

## **D. RESOURCES**

Despite their relatively small size, EROS was well armed and their arsenal included rocket-propelled grenade (RPGs), liquefied petroleum gas (LPGs), and AK-47s.<sup>13</sup> EROS members were recruited mainly from the Batticaloa and Amparai districts in Eastern Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup>

## **E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS**

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Historically, EROS has been more active in Eastern Sri Lanka than in Jaffna, although they conducted numerous political protests and non-violent activities here. As the conflict with the government intensified in the 1980s, EROS carried out a number of attacks in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital. Part of EROS' leadership was based in London; its operations, however, were exclusively conducted within Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup>

## **STRATEGY**

### **A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS**

Like other Tamil militant groups, EROS was fighting for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindus in Northern Sri Lanka. EROS, however, as one of the oldest militant

groups, had a stricter grounding in Marxist thought and advocated for a Marxist-style revolution and a mass-based approach to Tamil independence. Unlike the LTTE, their focus was on the spread of socialist ideology and obtaining widespread local support, not the militarization of their forces.<sup>16</sup> EROS also disagreed with the LTTE on the potential boundaries of a future, independent state of Eelam for Sri Lanka's Tamils. EROS, along with the EPRLF, envisioned a larger area for Eelam that would include Sri Lanka's central highland areas. These areas were populated primarily by Indian plantation workers that EROS viewed as an essential part of the "proletariat."<sup>17</sup>

## **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

In 1989, after first boycotting the parliamentary elections, 10 of EROS' leaders joined the Sri Lankan parliament, signaling the end of EROS' military activities and its rebirth as a political party. According to Ratnasabapathy, the founder of EROS, "[EROS] came here today in the hope of using Parliament as a forum to propagate on behalf of the Tamil people, although we do not think Parliament can resolve the ethnic problems of this country."<sup>18</sup>

## **C. TARGETS AND TACTICS**

While the EROS did conduct one high profile kidnapping in early 1986, this strategy ultimately proved unsuccessful. Instead, EROS mainly targeted sites of economic importance, as one of their major strategies was to sabotage the Sri Lankan economy and deter investors. For example, in 1984, EROS bombed an oil pipeline north of Colombo.<sup>19</sup> Other notable targets include the Katunayake International Airport in Colombo, the Central Telegraph office in Colombo, and several major markets in Colombo.<sup>20</sup>

## **MAJOR ATTACKS**

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

It is reported that from 1986-1987, at least 400 people were killed in terrorist attacks perpetrated by EROS.<sup>21</sup>

**January 28, 1984:** EROS detonated a bomb at the Hotel Oberoi in Colombo where the government was holding a meeting to discuss future negotiations with Tamil militant groups (unknown casualties).<sup>22</sup>

**October 1984:** EROS bombed an oil pipeline north of Colombo (unknown casualties).<sup>23</sup>

**April 25, 1985:** EROS bombed the Army Headquarters in Colombo (unknown casualties).<sup>24</sup>

**November 12, 1985:** EROS bombed an inner-city train in Colombo (unknown casualties).<sup>25</sup>

**January 17, 1986:** EROS members kidnapped British journalist Penelope Willis from Mullaitivu and accused her of being a British spy working alongside the Sri Lankan

government. Willis was released on February 18th, 1986 after negotiations between British diplomats, EROS, and the International Red Cross (0 killed).<sup>26</sup>

**May 3, 1986:** EROS bombed an Air Lanka Tristar Jet at Katunayake International Airport in Colombo. Seventeen of the twenty-one victims killed were foreigners (21 killed, 41 wounded).<sup>27</sup>

**May 3, 1986:** EROS bombed the Central Telegraph Office in Colombo. This attack was carried out on the same day as the bombing at Katunayake airport (14 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>28</sup>

**April 21, 1987:** A car bomb exploded in a major market in Colombo. It is believed that the LTTE collaborated with EROS to execute this attack (113 killed, 200+ wounded).<sup>29</sup>

## INTERACTIONS

### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

This group has not been designated as a terrorist organization by any major national government or international body.

### B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

EROS was one of the first and only groups to develop a relationship with Eastern Sri Lanka's Muslims, which constitute the second largest ethnic group in the region after the Tamils.<sup>30</sup>

### C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Soon after its formation, EROS began cultivating ties with other revolutionary movements around the world, specifically the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). EROS' leaders in London quickly developed a relationship with Syed Hameed, the PLO's representative in the UK. Hameed subsequently organized training for EROS and LTTE cadres in Lebanon.<sup>31</sup> Between 1976-1986, the PLO trained around 150 Tamil militants.<sup>32</sup>

EROS had a constantly changing relationship with the other "Big Five" Tamil militant groups operating in the 1980s. Initially, EROS and the LTTE formed an alliance when, in 1976, they agreed to use EROS-run training camps in Vavuniya as the main military training site for both groups.<sup>33</sup> In the mid-1980s, however, tensions began to rise between the LTTE and EROS, as the LTTE undertook a systematic campaign to eliminate what is deemed as the more moderate Tamil groups, including TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF, and EROS. After the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in 1990, EROS leader V. Balakumaran broke away from EROS with his supporters to join the LTTE, effectively disbanding the group.<sup>34</sup>

In 1979, a faction of EROS broke away to form the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).<sup>35</sup> The faction, led by former EROS leaders Suresh Premachandran, Douglas Devananda, and others, split from EROS because of a growing rift between the group's leaders in London and Jaffna. By the mid-1980s, the EPRLF had surpassed EROS.<sup>36</sup>

In 1985, EPRLF, TELO, TULF, and the LTTE joined forces to form the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) to participate in the Thimphu Talks brokered by India. The group, however, was short-lived; in 1986, relations between the groups deteriorated as the EPRLF, TELO, and EROS loosened their demands on the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE undertook a campaign to eliminate these more ‘moderate’ groups.<sup>37</sup> PLOTE was not included.

#### D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

After the start of the First Eelam War in 1983, EROS established close ties with RAW, the external unit of the Indian Intelligence Services. Soon thereafter, EROS members began training at Indian camps.<sup>38</sup>

#### MAPS

- Sri Lanka

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<sup>1</sup> Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Bandarage, Asoka. *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, and Political Economy*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> “Is LTTE ideologue Balakumar dead or alive?” 28 July 2010. Lankan Newspapers. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890\\_space.html](http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890_space.html)>

<sup>5</sup> “Is LTTE ideologue Balakumar dead or alive?” 28 July 2010. Lankan Newspapers. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890\\_space.html](http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890_space.html)>

<sup>6</sup> “Is LTTE ideologue Balakumar dead or alive?” 28 July 2010. Lankan Newspapers. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890\\_space.html](http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2010/7/58890_space.html)>

<sup>7</sup> Sambandan, V.S. “EROS founder member dead.” *The Hindu*. 11 January, 2005. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://www.hindu.com/2005/01/11/stories/2005011101701400.htm>>

<sup>8</sup> Sambandan, V.S. “EROS founder member dead.” *The Hindu*. 11 January, 2005. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://www.hindu.com/2005/01/11/stories/2005011101701400.htm>>

<sup>9</sup> Sambandan, V.S. “EROS founder member dead.” *The Hindu*. 11 January, 2005. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://www.hindu.com/2005/01/11/stories/2005011101701400.htm>>

<sup>10</sup> “A Tribute to Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy.” Tamil Information Centre. 16 December 2006. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://tamilweek.com/news-features/archives/698>>

<sup>11</sup> Cruz, Dexter. “Former Tamil Rebels Take Parliament Oath.” 21 July 1989. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1989/Former-Tamil-Rebels-Take-Parliament-Oath/id-3faef279f2d0d16993a8a2c841e61a55>>

<sup>12</sup> Furtado, Christina S. “Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Furtado, Christina S. “Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> “Growth of Sri Lankan Tamil Militancy in Tamil Nadu.” Jain Commission Interim Report. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth\\_of\\_tamil\\_militancy/bgsec2.html](http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth_of_tamil_militancy/bgsec2.html)>

<sup>15</sup> Furtado, Christina S. “Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Furtado, Christina S. “Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> “A Tribute to Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy.” Tamil Information Centre. 16 December 2006. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <<http://tamilweek.com/news-features/archives/698>>

<sup>19</sup> Samaranayaka, Gamini. *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008.

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- <sup>31</sup> "Growth of Sri Lankan Tamil Militancy in Tamil Nadu." Jain Commission Interim Report. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth\\_of\\_tamil\\_militancy/bgsec2.html](http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth_of_tamil_militancy/bgsec2.html)>.
- <sup>32</sup> Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
- <sup>33</sup> "Growth of Sri Lankan Tamil Militancy in Tamil Nadu." Jain Commission Interim Report. Web. Accessed 31 July 2013. <[http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth\\_of\\_tamil\\_militancy/bgsec2.html](http://tamilnation.co/intframe/india/jaincommission/growth_of_tamil_militancy/bgsec2.html)>
- <sup>34</sup> Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
- <sup>35</sup> Furtado, Christina S. "Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition, the Case of South Asia." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007.
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