

Mr Thambidurai
Muthukumaraswamy



*Retired International Advocacy Director, Amnesty
International*

Born 23 February 1949, Died 19 January 2026

In 76 years, Thambidurai Muthukumaraswamy, known as Kumar, lived so much life, and touched the lives of many people worldwide, that it is difficult to express everything he encompassed. When choosing the venue for his funeral, one criteria stood out: it needed a very big parking lot.

Kumar grew up in Thirunelveli in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The son of a respected District Judge and one of eight siblings, he was notoriously naughty, cheeky and adventurous. He had a magnetic quality which drew people towards him. While he would go on to mobilise thousands of people at demonstrations, his first followers were his brother and sisters. Whenever they were up to no good, his parents didn't have to look far to find the ringleader.

As a young man, Kumar set his sights on a career in engineering, enrolling at Jaffna Technical College. But like so many things in life, this did not go according to plan. Sri Lanka became increasingly politicised, and once elected as President of the Student Council, Kumar began organising against government 'standardisation' policies, which required higher entry standards for Tamils than other students. His public speaking, organising and mobilising skills quickly drew the attention of authorities, and after numerous police

interrogations, he was incarcerated in Jaffna's Fort without charge or trial. Released six months later, to the great relief of his family, the trajectory of his life had changed forever.

Kumar continued to campaign on Tamil issues, as well as broadening his focus to oppose caste and gender discrimination. While his integrity and consistency made him even more popular among Tamils, the government were less impressed. He was re-arrested numerous times, spending over five years in jail, all without charge or trial. Imprisoned for his peaceful political organising, Kumar was selected as a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International, which campaigned for his release.

During his time in prison Kumar studied obsessively, but having seen the legal system first-hand, his focus was now the law. It wasn't easy. On top of poor food, noise, constant prison transfers and a period on hunger strike, he had to attend his mother's funeral in handcuffs. Despite these obstacles, Kumar won a place at law school, maintaining his studies as he was continually released and re-arrested.

On qualifying as a lawyer, Kumar lost no time putting his qualifications into practice, immediately providing pro-bono representation for other political detainees. It was a dangerous time, as conflict worsened and the killing of Tamil activists increased. Representing clients in court by day, by night he kept on the move, never sleeping in one place for more than a night.

With his life under threat, Kumar took the decision to leave his home, his family, and everything he had worked for. After a six-month spell in Malaysia his visa ran out, and he travelled to Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa, looking for a place to settle and a way to establish his career.

Kumar described the people of Africa as the best human beings he had ever met, and their kindness to him, as well as the realities of apartheid, made a lasting impression. When a kind official at the US embassy in Botswana granted him a visa to the US, Kumar flew to Boston, to be welcomed by an embryonic Tamil diaspora. He later moved to New York and found his way to the United Nations Headquarters, where he began meeting diplomats and officials, lobbying for intervention in Sri Lanka. He spent time helping the UN Quaker Mission in

Philadelphia, and gained an Advanced Law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

Kumar spent 22 years working for Amnesty International, including as Director of International Advocacy, influencing the foreign policy of several US administrations. He monitored elections worldwide, both with former President Carter and with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. He also taught at the American University Law School and the Foreign Service Institute.

To Kumar, education was precious beyond measure. And he didn't stop after gaining his own qualifications or sharing his knowledge through public engagements and media interviews.

While Kumar did not have children of his own, his many nieces and nephews became lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists and high-flying accountants, who would not be where they are today without him. He supported so many people it is impossible to count them, partly because much of Kumar's bottomless generosity happened quietly, 'behind the scenes.'

As one of the founding fathers of the Tamil resistance movement, people from across the Sri Lankan Tamil nation and diaspora often came to Kumar for help. He never said no. Perhaps he simply

didn't know how to. Just two weeks ago, a few days after his passing, some of his family in the UK mentioned the sad news in a coffee shop. The young Tamil barista asked, 'excuse me, which Uncle Kumar are you talking about?' You can probably already guess what comes next. Like so many others, the barista had also been sponsored by Kumar.

We should not think that Kumar was a saint. He never lost his sense of mischief, as his wife Sivam soon found out when they married. As newly-weds, his wife still getting to grips with the US, Kumar didn't miss the opportunity to exploit her innocence to comic effect. This continued over the years, although she soon got wise to his antics. When chocolate mysteriously disappeared from the cupboard, she became less and less inclined to believe his claims that he knew nothing about it. Despite his irrepressible nature, Kumar was not just a supportive husband to Sivam, he was her adviser, her bodyguard who protected her, and sometimes her cook.

Kumar was conscious of, and grateful for, everything he received. He appreciated the love and support of his mother, whose photograph he carried everywhere with him throughout his life. He was thankful for his father's support, which remained

steady, even when Kumar's activism put him in a difficult position as a District Judge. Whenever officers arrived to arrest Kumar, he would simply say, "Well done son, go ahead." Kumar was also aware of the help he received during his numerous spells in prison – including from prison officials and other prisoners. His siblings helped however they could: cooking and smuggling in food, bringing him books and keeping up his morale. He was later grateful to the US for protecting him and offering him a home. He was deeply grateful to his wife, who at times may have needed more than a little patience with the breadth of his generosity.

While his work directed Kumar's attention worldwide, he never abandoned the struggle for Tamil Eelam, and during the last year of his life, he finally returned home to visit the country of his birth.

For Kumar, who died on Martin Luther King Day, the struggle of one person, race, gender, caste or nation could never be viewed in isolation. He believed that a problem for one person or group, was a problem for all human beings. Kumar staked his entire professional career on that belief. He also lived it out at every level of his life.