

Muslim leader quits parliament to fight provincial poll

Rauf Hakeem, one of Sri Lanka's most prominent Muslim leaders, Wednesday resigned from parliament with two other party MPs to contest eastern provincial elections aiming to become the region's chief minister.

Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem, general secretary Hassan Ali and treasurer Bashir Segudawood have resigned their parliament seats to take part in the eastern provincial polls scheduled in May, party sources said.

The Sri Lankan military last year took control of the sprawling multi-ethnic eastern province, comprising Trincomalee, Amparai and Batticaloa districts, from the Tamil Tigers.

Balloting for nine councils in the eastern wing took place in March. The Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) overwhelmingly won these elections.

The man who formed TMVP is Karuna, the former regional commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who broke away from the group in 2004.

The government then called for nominations to hold elections to a provincial council in the eastern province.

With the nominations closing by noon Thursday, the SLMC has formed an alliance with the main opposition United National Party (UNP) to fight this election.

'Hakeem will contest in Trincomalee district while Hassan Ali will contest in Amparai and Segudawood in Batticaloa on the UNP-SLMC coalition ticket,' a party official told IANS.

The official added: 'We want a Muslim to be the chief minister of the eastern province.'

The Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces were one entity until the Supreme Court ordered their de-merger last year.

Unlike the overwhelmingly Tamil north, the eastern province is also home to large numbers of Muslims - who also speak Tamil but consider themselves a distinct ethnic group - and Sinhalese, the country's majority community.

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