

## Ex-Tiger guerrilla turns a chief minister in Sri Lanka

A former hardened Tamil Tiger guerrilla who fought the Sri Lankan military for years was Friday sworn in as chief minister of the island's troubled eastern province.

Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, known more widely by his nom de guerre Pillaiyan, took oath before President Mahinda Rajapaksa at a function held at the Presidential Secretariat here amid tight security.

Pillaiyan heads the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP), which was formed by guerrillas who broke away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2004.

Pillaiyan hails from Pethalai, a fishing village at Valaichchenai in Batticaloa district and had his primary education at Vipulananda Vidyalaya at Pethalai before joining the LTTE in his teens.

Rajapaksa, whose administration has vowed to crush the LTTE, picked Pillaiyan as chief minister despite requests from Muslim parties in his coalition government to name a Muslim to the top post.

'Pillaiyan has been sworn in as the chief minister by the president Friday evening,' a presidential aide told IANS.

The multi-ethnic eastern province comprises the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai.

Pillaiyan was a long-time member of the LTTE and fought bitter battles against the government forces to carve out a separate state comprising the northeastern region of the island nation.

In March 2004, he joined hands with former LTTE regional commander Vinayagamurthy Muralitharan alias 'Colonel Karuna Amman' and quit the LTTE and then viciously turned against his former comrades.

With Karuna now in custody in Britain after entering the country on a false Sri Lankan diplomatic passport, Pillaiyan became the virtual head of the TMVP.

In July, the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) led by Rajapaksa declared that the military had flushed the LTTE from its former strongholds in the east after a year of fighting.

Vowing to develop the war-ravaged east as a role model for the country's other eight provinces, the government held elections for the maiden eastern provincial council this month after forging an alliance with the TMVP.

The UPFA-TMVP alliance won the May 10 polls amid charges of fraud and won 20 seats in the 37-member council.

According to official results, Pillaiyan topped the list of preferential votes (41,936). The UPFA-TMVP coalition bagged 308,886 votes, against the opposition coalition's 250,732 votes.

The TMVP may have entered the democratic mainstream, but it has not given up its weapons.

On the eve of the provincial polls, Pillaiyan told BBC that his party was carrying weapons only to defend itself from the LTTE, considered the world's most potent insurgent group.

He said their weapons were on 'sleeping mode' and would be carried until the LTTE was militarily weakened.

The Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces, also described as the 'traditional homeland of the Tamils', remained merged following the 1987 India-Sri Lanka accord. But they were separated following a ruling by the country's Supreme Court last year.

Annamalai Vardharaja Perumal of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), another anti-LTTE group, served as the first (and last) chief minister of the merged northeastern province from 1988. He fled Sri Lanka after Indian troops withdrew from the country in 1990.

*P. Karunakharan ( © IANS / India eNews)*