

Sri Lanka's renegade rebel leader turns legislator amid protests

Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, a famed Tamil Tiger guerrilla who sensationally split the group four years ago, Tuesday took oath as a member of Sri Lanka's 225-seat parliament amid protests by the opposition parties, parliament sources said.

Muralitharan, widely known by his nom de guerre Karuna, heads the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP), which he formed after breaking from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2004. He was sworn in by Speaker W.J.M. Lokkubandara as a MP of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

According to the sources, while MPs from the treasury benches 'warmly welcomed' Muralitharan, who used to be known as 'Colonel Karuna' when he was in the LTTE, the legislators of the opposition parties walked out of the house when he took oath.

Members of the main opposition United National Party (UNP), the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) virtually boycotted his oath taking event as a mark of protest.

According to a government gazette notification, Karuna was named to fill the vacancy created by the resignation of former UPFA MP Wasantha Samarasinghe, who chose to contest the recent north-central provincial council election as a candidate of the JVP, a former coalition partner of the UPFA.

The JVP has threatened to take legal action against the move to make Karuna a MP, accusing the ruling coalition of breaching an electoral pact of 2004 between the UPFA and JVP.

Karuna was born in Kiran, a village in the eastern district of Batticaloa in 1966. He joined the LTTE when he was 17 years old following the 1983 anti-Tamil violence.

He quickly rose the ranks to become the LTTE's eastern province regional commander and led a number of attacks against the Sri Lankan military in the northeast.

Karuna also took part in several rounds of peace talks with the government as a key member of the LTTE peace delegation after the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002.

Once a trusted lieutenant of LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, he broke away from the group along with hundreds of cadres loyal to him in March 2004.

Since then, he and his cadres have worked closely with the government, hunting down his former comrades. The TMVP deputy leader, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, known as Pillaiyan, is now chief minister of the maiden provincial council in the country's east.

Karuna returned to Sri Lanka in July from Britain after nine months in prison after authorities there found him guilty of illegally entering the country allegedly on a diplomatic passport.

In the past, local and international human rights groups have accused Karuna of rights violations including abductions and child recruitment. He has denied the allegations.

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