



## A Tamil blockbuster movie

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In the intervening years, Muralitharan, better known as Col. Karuna, had to flee his native Batticaloa in Sri Lanka's east, lost his brother to internecine violence between the LTTE and his followers, withstood an internal putsch among his own loyalists, served a jail term in Britain for visa irregularities and faced possible prosecution for human rights violations.

When Karuna, leader of the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), or Tamil People's Freedom Tigers, was administered the oath of office on Oct. 7 as member for the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), few believed that this was the denouement of a convoluted plot with many players starting with President Mahinda Rajapakse.

'There is a very obvious political motive behind him [Karuna] coming to parliament. It will definitely help the ruling coalition at elections in the east,' Austin Fernando, who was Sri Lanka's defence secretary during the 2002-2003 negotiations with the LTTE, told IPS.

'Leaving aside the allegations against the man for ordering the mass murders of policemen, underage recruitments and other rights violations, Karuna now has a great opportunity to deliver on his promises to the people of the east,' Fernando, who interacted frequently with Karuna as a member of the LTTE negotiating team, said.

Karuna who served the LTTE for more than 20 years, including as bodyguard to the group's reclusive leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, defected in 2004 claiming that the specific interests of the eastern province were being neglected in the war to carve out a Tamil homeland in Sinhala-majority Sri Lanka.

The LTTE had, during peace talks with the government in Geneva in 2006, repeatedly accused Colombo of arming and supporting Karuna and the TMVP -- and the talks failed over the issue.

The 42-year-old Karuna says that his new political role will enable him to initiate development of the eastern province. 'This (appointment as MP) is an honour to the Tamils. This also is an opportunity to develop the east, which has been devastated by years of war,' he told IPS on Friday.

In his maiden speech in parliament Karuna said that bygones should be left as bygones and that he was looking to the future. 'Let us forget the unpleasant incidents of the past, and live in brotherhood,' he said.

Fernando feels Karuna may now be in a better position to consolidate the leadership of the TMVP. In mid-2007, he faced a challenge from Sivasuntharai Chanthrakanthan, alias Pillayan, who was elected as chief minister of the eastern province after it was wrested from LTTE control by the Sri Lankan army last year.

'Karuna can now initiate work in the east and if he did not have such a position [as MP], he risked being marginalised,' Fernando said.

Fernando, who once served as an administrator in Batticaloa, said Karuna had always enjoyed support from the eastern Tamils. 'He was always considered a son of the soil; he was always the man from the east.'

Observers say that Karuna's defection to the government camp not only reduced the LTTE's sway over the east but also considerably reduced the power of the LTTE.

'Prabhakaran recognised the talents of Karuna and appointed him as a frontline commander in the most difficult battles. But Karuna knew when to quit the LTTE and join Sri Lankan mainstream politics. If there are five other Karunas the LTTE will be dead,' international terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna told IPS.

Karuna who joined the LTTE in 1983 played key roles in major battles in the north, including the overrunning of the army's Elephant Pass garrison in 2000, and in peace negotiations with Colombo.

Like his chequered career, his new appointment too has stirred up controversy. 'This is daylight robbery by the government, we have no issue with Karuna being appointed to parliament, but the seat he now holds is rightfully ours,' the general secretary of the Jana Vimukthi Perumana (JVP) or People's Liberation Front, Tilvin Silva, said.

Karuna was appointed to parliament on a vacancy created by the resignation of JVP lawmaker Vasantha Samarasinghe. The JVP's request that one of its own members be appointed to the seat was ignored and the party has now petitioned the Supreme Court against Karuna's appointment.

A second petition, seeking nullification of Karuna's appointment and restraining him from attending parliament, has been filed by Jayasinghe Arachchige Somasiri, naming leaders of the ruling coalition and the Speaker as respondents.

But there are more serious charges being levelled against Karuna by rights groups including child soldier recruitment, torture and extortion both before and after he defected from the LTTE.

'Karuna should stand trial,' said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific director in a statement soon after the new appointment. 'The fact that a suspected war criminal should be entering parliament sends an appalling message -- that war crimes, rather than being investigated and punished, are actually rewarded. It also contributes to endemic impunity, which has characterised the approach of all parties to the conflict for decades.'

Karuna clearly faces tough challenges ahead. Gunaratna said that despite his popularity in the east, Karuna will find it difficult to appeal to the northern Tamils. 'The divisions between northern and eastern Tamils have been acute. The traditional leadership of Tamil politics has always been northern oriented and Karuna will have some problems trying to achieve a footing in the north.'

Fernando feels that the former Tiger will also have to walk a fine line in order to maintain his political independence. 'If Karuna tries to go with the southern [Sinhala dominated] polity, he will risk support with the Tamil political power base. He has to charter his own course.'

The former defence secretary said Karuna can be expected to make use of ethnic divisions within eastern Sri Lanka to his advantage.

'There are a lot of divisions along ethnic lines in the east,' Fernando said indicating the fact that three communities, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim have large representations in the province. 'No politician or elected official has tried to appeal to the eastern community as a whole. He has the chance now. But it will be a slow process.'

Karuna has appealed for patience. 'You cannot expect immediate change. The east has just been recovered from the clutches of the LTTE. It has so far faced two successful elections. It will take some more time to develop the area. This is a great start though.'

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