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Tanzania elects first albino lawmaker

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By AFP

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Tanzania's first elected albino lawmaker said Wednesday it was a breakthrough for albinos in the east African country, where scores have been murdered for their body parts used in witchcraft.

Salum Khalfani Bar'wani won the southern Tanzania Lindi Town constituency seat, beating a ruling party candidate who had served in parliament for 15 years.

The 51-year-old MP-elect said his victory signalled a change in Tanzanians' attitude towards the disabled and albinos, who have been hunted down by witchdoctors for their body parts used to concoct lucky charms.

"I am happy with the choice of the people. They voted hugely to elect me," Bar'wani said by phone from his remote hometown of Lindi.

"In the past, people did not believe that an albino or any disabled person could have such an opportunity without sympathy or being favoured. Now they believe that we are capable without sympathy."

Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete in 2008 nominated an albino woman to parliament at the height of the ritual albino killings.

Winning the seat did not however come easy for Bar'wan, who stood as a candidate of the opposition Civic United Front (CUF) in Sunday's election.

His opponents urged their supporters to reject him saying he could not think properly because he was an albino, he said.

"My opponents ridiculed me and residents here were infuriated by that. They said albinos lack vitamin C and therefore they do not have the ability to think.

"They told supporters not to choose an albino because of this," he added.

The head of Tanzania Albino Society Ernest Kimaya welcomed Bar'wan's election.

"We are happy to get one albino MP this year. It's very good. It shows our importance in the community," Kimaya told AFP.

Bar'wani said he would work to address problems facing albinos in the vast east Africa country, where at least 40 albinos have been murdered in since 2007.

"I am a free MP elected by the people. I will advocate for policies favouring the disabled so that the government can address their problems," he said.

Albinism is a genetic condition characterised by a deficiency of pigmentation in the skin, hair and eyes.

People suffering from the condition are discriminated against and persecuted in many African countries.

In Tanzania, they are killed and dismembered due to a widespread belief that charms made from their body parts bring good fortune and prosperity.

Many of the murders have occurred around the country's northern Mwanza region.

Bar'wani is a member of the Central Executive Committee of the CUF, one of Tanzania's two main opposition parties. He is married with one child. Neither his wife nor his child has albinism.

Sunday's general election have given the incumbent President Jakaya Kikwete a lead over his five opponents.

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