

THE MAY 2001 RIOTS IN MAWANELLA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

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The riots that broke out in the Mawanella town on May 2, 2001 took most people by surprise. First, these riots had no apparent relation to the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. Second, the riots developed from a confrontation between Sinhala and Muslim elements within the Mawanella bazaar. Given the peaceful relations that had so far prevailed between the two communities, these riots came as a shock to many people. Third, in terms of their possible impact on the future course of ethnic relations in the country the Mawanella riots and similar eruptions around Hatton following the Bindunuwewa incident last year can be seen as the most significant chain of riots in Sri Lanka since the nation wide outbreak of anti-Tamil riots in July 1983. Fourth, the Mawanella riots led to a chain of events that finally brought about the downfall of the regime in power.

Using available reports and preliminary field inquiries, this paper examines factors contributing to the outbreak of riots in Mawanella in May 2001. Media accounts and some "official inquiries" into these events have sought to apportion the blame among various actors including the thugs, their political masters and the police. While the specific role of these various actors must be examined in any investigation of the relevant events, undue attention on the trigger factors (i.e. those that sparked the initial confrontation) tends to under emphasize the underlying causes of the riots. This paper explores why a seemingly private dispute between two narrowly defined parties (extortionist thugs versus owners of /workers in certain business houses) quickly turned into a riot where the battle lines were clearly drawn along ethnic lines. Also it must be noted that the Mawanella riots were not an isolated event but a culmination of a series of tremors that surfaced in Mawanella and nearby locations.

In trying to identify the underlying causes of the Mawanella riots, attention must be drawn to a pattern of population distribution. While the Muslims vastly outnumber the Sinhala in a narrowly defined urban corridor (bazaar), the pattern is reversed in the surrounding rural hinterland where the Sinhala are an overwhelming majority. This, in turn, is related to a pattern of business competition where a heavy Muslim domination in business has come under some challenge from an emerging layer of Sinhala entrepreneurs with the strong backing of certain local politicians. Even though each ethnic group is internally divided along class lines, a rising ethnic fervor has guided business competition and political action. Within this context all that was needed to spark a major communal disturbance were some unlawful Anti-Muslim acts of thugs who obviously enjoyed police protection. As in all other ethnic riots vicious rumour played a major role in inciting the two communities against each other. The Mawanella riots point to the need for law enforcement machinery, the police in particular, to be more sensitive to ethnic relations and to reflect the ethnic heterogeneity of each area in its composition. More importantly, community and school based programmes are needed to promote mutual understanding and to diffuse any existing tensions between ethnic communities.