

ECONOMIC COMPETITION AND ETHNICITY IN THE MAY 2001 RIOTS OF MAWANELLA

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There are two popular and, to some extent, contrasting explanations of May 2001 riots in Mawanella. One is that it merely reflects economic and political competition among various interests groups in this booming urban center in an emerging urban corridor in Sri Lanka. The other is that it is an ethnically motivated riot reflecting increasing ethnicization of social conflict in Sri Lanka. This paper argues that while there is an element of truth in each of these arguments, a synthesis of these two arguments is necessary in order to fully understand the nature and causes of these riots.

It is true that simmering economic competition and business rivalries within the Mawanella town has been an important underlying factor in the social history of the town since 1930s. Mawanella is an important urban centre where collection and bulking of important economic produce in the surrounding countryside, including spices, has been the primary economic activity. In more recent times certain service sector activities, including employment bureaus recruiting overseas migrant workers, have been added to the spectrum of urban economic operations. Most of these economic activities are controlled by Muslims, while the Sinhala peasants in the surrounding hinterland have encountered many difficulties owing to landlessness, poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities in general.

While a thorough analysis of this economic backdrop is necessary for understanding the wider context of the riots, equally important are politicization of ethnicity (emergence of ethnically-oriented political parties among both Sinhalese and Muslims), manipulation of ethnic symbols by both groups, increased pattern of ethnic segregation in spatial terms and increased tendency to attribute one's own vulnerabilities to "the ethnic other". This in turn points to the need to understand the riots using a broader framework that takes into account the interplay between socio-economic and ethnic parameters.