

GUARDIAN OF LAW OR HARBINGER OF HATRED? THE ROLE OF POLICE IN MAY 2001 RIOTS IN MAWANELLA, SRI LANKA

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The May 2001 riots in Mawanella came as a surprise and indeed a rude shock to many. It demonstrated that the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka is not limited to a Sinhala-Tamil divide as assumed in much of social science research and policy dialogue in Sri Lanka. With a view to identify possible means of preventing the recurrence of such events the present paper concentrates on the role played by the police in this civil disturbance. The trigger for Mawanella riots was a private dispute where a group of local Sinhala "thugs" attacked an employee in a Muslim hotel near the bus stand. The thugs came to the hotel late at night on April 30, 2001 and demanded extortion money (*kappam*). When the hotel workers refused to comply, an argument erupted and the thugs dragged out one of them, slashed his mouth with a knife and tied him to the nearby clock tower, threatening others not to rescue him. How did this seemingly interpersonal clash turn into a major communal disturbance along ethnic lines?

The Sinhala-Muslim relations in the Mawanella area have been generally peaceful, with multiple economic, social and cultural ties and interdependencies between the two communities. However, the economic competition for urban property and business opportunities, political competition for access to power and religious rivalries for greater visibility in urban space, have increasingly acquired ethnic dimensions. In this context, the incident on April 30 angered many Muslims. They promptly reported the matter to the police who intervened in rescuing the victim and securing medical treatment for him but failed to arrest or otherwise initiate action against the culprits who reportedly had some influence with powerful local politicians. A protest campaign started by Muslim youth turned into a violent clash between Muslim and Sinhala mobs with police largely turning against the Muslim crowds killing one of them and injuring several. This, in turn, led to widespread looting and arson where Sinhala and Muslim mobs destroyed property and places of worship belonging to the rival ethnic group. The police force in Mawanella at the time was entirely Sinhalese. The failure of the police to act against the Sinhala thugs and its apparent overreaction vis-à-vis the Muslim mobs can only be explained as an outright ethnic prejudice combined with concerns about possible repercussions of a deadly alliance between the thugs and powerful local politicians. The Muslim population in the town, while acknowledging the presence of some honest and impartial individual officers, had obvious reservations about the ability of the police to deliver justice and fair play. On the other hand, the Sinhala mobs took advantage of escalating tension between the police and the Muslim protesters, expecting and, in some ways, achieving a tacit approval for attacks against Muslim property. In order to prevent possible recurrence of such incidents the police must have a greater sensitivity to delicate and potentially volatile ethnic relations in the areas in which they operate.