

Sri Lankan Muslims protest violent attacks by racist thugs

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A racist attack on Muslims in the central hills town of Mawanella provoked angry protests last week by Sri Lanka's Tamil Muslim minority in several regions, including the capital Colombo. President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government ordered a police crackdown on the demonstrators and then imposed a curfew in Colombo and the neighbouring Western Province. The demonstrations were unprecedented in size and scope and provide further evidence of the explosive social tensions wracking the country.

The initial incident took place in Mawanella, a small town with a sizeable Muslim population about 90km from Colombo on the road to Kandy. On April 30 around 9.30pm, a group of thugs visited a hotel owned by a Muslim, took some cigarettes without paying, and then menaced the cashier to hand over money. When he refused to oblige, the cashier was seized, dragged outside, tied to an iron fence and had his mouth slashed with a knife. Three policemen saw the incident but stood by and did nothing to help the victim. The injured youth could only be hospitalised after the thugs left.

The following morning the hotel owner complained to the police but nothing was done to arrest the culprits. That evening 300 Muslims held a protest, demanding that the police take action. Lalith Dissanayake, an MP for the ruling Peoples Alliance, promised to persuade the police to make arrests but still the police did nothing. On May 2, the protest grew to 3,000 and only left when the police finally promised to arrest those responsible for the attack.

As the crowd was dispersing, however, a Sinhala mob, several hundred strong, descended on the area and went on a rampage, setting fire to Muslim-owned shops, houses, businesses and mosques. One group entered the town's main mosque dragged out the cleric and burned furniture, a funeral casket and a copy of the Koran. According to eyewitnesses, police actively helped the mob enter a hardware store by shooting off its padlock. Angered by the police actions, a group of Muslims stoned the police station and attacked several Sinhalese-owned shops. The police responded by firing into the crowd, killing two people, including 55-year-old Haniffa Mohamed, and injuring 15 others.

Angry at the news of the Mawanella attack, Muslim protesters took to the streets on May 4 after Friday prayers in Colombo, Kandy, Puttlam, Hambanthota and Ratnapura. Clashes took place outside the Maradana police station in Colombo, where police tear-gassed demonstrators and baton charged the crowd. Fifteen people

were injured, two seriously. According to eyewitness reports, special police commando units were involved in terrorising and physically attacking young people on the streets in Muslim areas. Scores of people were arrested, including Mujibur Rahuman, leader of the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), who was later released on bail.

The government reacted to the unrest by imposing a 12-hour curfew in Colombo and throughout the adjoining Western Province on the night of May 4-5. Hundreds of extra police and soldiers, including special rapid deployment units, were mobilised to patrol the capital.

On the night of May 6, the unrest spread to the Eastern Province, which has a large population of Tamil Muslims. Eight Sinhalese-owned shops were set on fire in a small town with a Muslim majority near Trincomalee. In Batticaloa, Muslim protesters blocked traffic by setting tyres alight.

According to some eyewitnesses in Mawanella, the initial attack was instigated by a gang of thugs that included the bodyguards of Mahipala Herath, a government minister from the Kegalla district. Herath, of course, has publicly denied any involvement.

A resident commented: "If the police had taken action against the thugs the situation would not have arisen. But the police and politicians collaborated with these thugs to provoke the communal clashes." One witness said: "These thugs are connected to the PA minister. They were used to intimidate voters during the last general elections. Normally they demand 200 or 500 rupees from shops, from Sinhala shop owners too. They run the police."

He blamed the local police officer-in-charge for inciting people against Muslims. Both of them said that the two communities had lived peacefully in the town for a long time but local politicians, police and thugs were attempting to deliberately pit Sinhalese against Muslims.

The government has announced the formation of a "peace committee" in the Mawanella area to include representatives of the Sinhala and Muslim communities as well as local police chiefs. It has also promised to pay compensation to those whose property was damaged.

But there are a number of signs that the Peoples Alliance is desperate to find a scapegoat. President Chandrika Kumaratunga appeared on national television on May 5, claiming that the incident in Mawanella and the protests in Colombo, along with a recent strike by railway workers, were all part of an organised conspiracy to topple her government. She provided no evidence

and named no one, but the arrest of Mujibur Rahuman may indicate that the government will try to pin the blame on the small MULF or other Muslim groups.

While Kumaratunga puts the Muslim protests down to the work of unnamed conspirators, the Colombo press generally tried to downplay the initial incident as the work of a single PA politician and his goons in Mawanella. Both seek to cover up the real source of the conflict, which lies in the ethnic and communal tensions whipped up in Sri Lanka by successive governments over decades.

The chief culprits in generating the racist political climate are the government and the Colombo media, which routinely resort to Sinhala chauvinism to justify the ongoing war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These ethnic and religious antagonisms have been compounded by the country's deepening economic and political crisis as well as the growing prominence of Sinhala extremist organisations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya.

The Muslim community, which forms a considerable section of the Tamil speaking population in Sri Lanka, has been subjected to continual discrimination for decades as part of the oppression of the Tamil minority as a whole. The majority of Muslims live in the eastern part of the island. Following the outbreak of war in 1983, successive governments have deliberately sought to divide the Tamil population by fostering communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. The LTTE played into Colombo's hands by accusing the Muslim population of "betraying the Tamil cause" and expelling them in 1990 en masse from the northern Jaffna peninsula. A decade later, some 300,000 Muslims still live in poverty in squalid refugee camps.

The rise of communalism led to the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1986 by a section of the Muslim elite seeking autonomy and more resources for the Eastern Province. The SLMC won seats in the Eastern Province in the 1988 elections and the party joined the ruling Peoples Alliance after the 1994 elections when it became clear that the United National Party (UNP) could not continue to rule.

The inclusion of the SLMC in the ruling alliance has always been fraught with tensions. Muslim-based politicians belonging to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the central component of the Peoples Alliance—have been in an increasingly bitter competition with the SLMC for political influence and positions. In the lead up to last October's general election, SLMC leader M.H.M. Ashraff drove a hard bargain over the allocation of seats and threatened to leave the PA. In the midst of these rancorous negotiations, Ashraff was killed in a helicopter crash in rather murky circumstances and the SLMC leaders subsequently did a deal with the PA.

In the course of the dispute, however, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake and other Sinhala chauvinists inside the SLFP directly accused the SLMC of using "minority power" to intimidate the government and extract more "privileges" for Muslims. During the election campaign SLMC leaders protested that the deputy defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte had used thugs to prevent Muslims voting in order to marginalise their influence in parliament.

Following the poll, anti-Muslim rhetoric went up another notch when the SLMC and its National Unity Alliance won 10 seats.

With the PA dependent on these seats for its majority in parliament, the SLMC extracted a number of concessions as the price of its support. The SU, the JVP and the Buddhist hierarchy all seized on the opportunity to denounce the government for caving in to the minorities and vowed to carry out a campaign to "break the power of the Muslims."

Communal tensions have been further heightened by the deteriorating economic situation, which is in part a result of the government's huge military spending. In the midst of rising prices and growing competition, particularly between small businesses and traders, Sihala Urumaya and its partner Sinhala Veera Vidahana (Sinhala Heroes Forum)—an organisation based on Sinhala traders—have intensified their chauvinist agitation against Tamil and Muslim businesses. Several months ago an anonymous leaflet, widely believed to be the work of Sihala Urumaya, was distributed in areas where Muslims have business interests, such as Mawanella and Kegalla, urging Sinhalese not to buy goods from Muslim traders.

Following last week's attack at Mawanella and the subsequent demonstrations, the fate of the government's majority is again in the balance. After touring the Mawanella area on May 3, SLMC leader Rauf Hakim declared that "the violence in and around Mawanella was directed against the economy of the Muslims and against mosques" and called on the government to arrest this "disturbing trend." On May 7, the SLMC issued a statement threatening to leave the ruling coalition unless the government established an inquiry, punished those responsible for the attacks and paid compensation to those affected.

Moreover, even if Kumaratunga does keep the SLMC in the PA coalition, the conflict is certain to reemerge as the government prepares to enter long delayed peace talks with the LTTE. Fearful that the interests of the Muslim elite will be ignored in any negotiations, the SLMC reiterated its demand in March for a separate Ampara administrative district in the east for Muslims and a direct say in the negotiating process. The LTTE and other Tamil parties, on the other hand, oppose any separation and insist that the north and east must be merged.

As the government, the LTTE, the SLMC and other parties all battle to impose their own particular plan to divide the island on ethnic lines, they will no doubt seek to consolidate their positions by appealing to communal and ethnic sentiment. The racist attack at Mawanella and the subsequent protests are a sharp indication of what is in store for the working class unless it begins to actively reject the poison of communalism and unify on a class basis to defend its living standards and the democratic rights of all, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion.



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