

***Conversations in a failing state* by Patrick Lawrence**

Reviewed by Fr. Roberto Reyes

Conversations in a Failing State is Patrick Lawrence's third book, published March 2008. He has served as a correspondent, commentator, and editor in Asia for more than 25 years, chiefly for the *International Herald Tribune*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. This book was researched and written in Mr Lawrence's capacity as Senior Rapporteur for the Asian Human Rights Commission. For ordering information please visit <http://www.humanrights.asia>

To the total stranger, Sri Lanka is no more than the modern name of an erstwhile British colony called Ceylon. Ceylon then would suggest a key export, tea. Between the story of a colony and its reputation as producer of world class tea, there is much to be said about Sri Lanka's continually beleaguered present and its emergence from an equally beleaguered past. *Conversations in a Failing State* is Patrick Lawrence's attempt at using the past as mirror to the present. The author achieves this by relying on the recollections of individuals of the Sri Lanka they knew and experienced.

Most of these recollections are sad and gray, a story of decline and decay. Both systems and individuals play a crucial role in this as the author observes: "Yes, men and women can destroy institutions, and it is a sad fact of public life that they do so far more easily than they can build or rebuild them. But the Sri Lankan case appears to be one gradual decline from the bottom up rather than the work of a single man."

Then he speaks of the justice system, "The higher courts appear simply to have taken the character evident for so many years in the lower courts, the courts that are supposed to serve ordinary people. So it is partly a matter of everyone now getting the treatment ordinary people have long endured." Thus, both persons and institutions are, as it were, going down with the flu.

The author gathered data through personal interviews which he termed "conversations." A whole gamut of Sri Lankans were interviewed, from the ordinary to the more prominent. The very personal testimonies are a combination of historical facts and personal reflection gradually bringing together the pieces of a complex puzzle called Sri Lanka. They make up essential aspects of Sri Lankan history in the last century, focusing on the more recent developments which drove a wedge between Sri Lanka's British colonial past and the current politics of elitist rule backed by a corrupted and compromised police and military forces. The current woes of Sri Lanka are: the war being waged by Tamil separatists against the Sinhalese majority; a failed justice system controlled by an all-too powerful president who appoints only loyal lawyers to positions from the highest (Chief Justice) to the lowest (judge in the poorer provinces); human rights violations from torture to illegal detention.

What is of interest is the emerging variety of analyses that help understand both aspects of Sri Lankan history as well as the elusive Sri Lankan character. Sri Lankan history is marked by progressive institutional collapse, seen in particular in terms of an all too powerful presidency, abusive police, military, a compromised judiciary and corruption. Important historical markers vis-à-vis personal evolution show this interesting interplay between history and character. For instance, the author frames the life of one of his informants, Vijaya, in the following way: describing Vijaya in his twenties, before and after the *hartal*; before and after the election of 1956 and before and after the language law. A seemingly endless story of suffering has produced a sad picture of victims. A mentality of looking up and looking down seems to afflict many. Each citizen can define herself in terms of those above and below her. On the lower-most rungs of the government stand the police, who manifest the "clearest, most naked expression of self-contempt that is now part of the hierarchical consciousness."

There is more than one war raging in Sri Lanka. The first is apparently ethnic between the government composed of a Sinhalese majority and the Tamil separatists. A second war goes on everyday, in police

stations, lower courts and jail cells. A third war is violence rooted in psychology and ultimately self-image. In another place, an informant uses the words “collective neurosis.” Again, due to constant threat of violence, people have become either fearful or desensitized.

But Sri Lankans are struggling and fighting. Small but significant successes have been documented, as in the cases of Angaline Roshana, Palitha Tissa Kumara and Lalith Rajapakse. These are ordinary Sri Lankans who suffered from torture and legal abuse, but who bravely fought for their rights and succeeded after some time. While a prominent member of the Colombo elite commented, “all of us are simply trapped” an informant, Thangavelu, felt differently, “You cannot say there is no hope. The human resources are superb. You can turn around the mentality in a couple of years if you really concentrate on it.” In the same vein, Chitral, living a life of defiance and revolution, insists that “hierarchy must be challenged.” He then proposes an important question of distance, “At what distance should one stand in a society as near to failure as Sri Lanka?”

The author ends the way he begins. The voices he heard in conversation lamented the gradual disappearance of public space. All of Sri Lanka has been reduced to the narrow and jealous space of the political elite, shared by chosen loyalists in the judiciary and military. Towards the end of the book, public space is being reclaimed in a slow, painful and even risky way by individuals, groups and communities, which fight and promote the rights of the uncomfortably silent in Sri Lanka. Examples of this are colorfully illustrated by the likes of Shanti, Mrs Malkanthi, Clifford, a Judicial Medical Officer, Fr. George, the Uruwerige tribe and Amitha Priyanthi. Memory although personal and individual is transformed into history through the courageous struggle of individuals, communities and groups either for themselves or others.

There is hope for Sri Lanka. This precarious hope hinges on those who see, experience, speak and act beyond the narrow confines of ethnicity, elitist politics, compromised religion, meaningless suffering and repression and appropriated history, and together ‘re-enter’ and ‘reclaim’ Sri Lanka by recreating public space.