

A Diplomatic Legacy: One on One with HE Eduardo Maglaya, Philippine Ambassador to Bahrain

By Mary Coons

His Excellency Eduardo Maglaya, in his final year as the Philippine Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bahrain, sits down with Bahrain Traveler's International Editor and reflects on his five years on the Islamic island.

During his first term, which began April 1, 2003, the Ambassador was charged with improving his embassy's relations with the Filipino community. That may come as a surprise, but according to the Ambassador, "When I first arrived, the Embassy was quite distant from the Filipino community. In fact, it was our president who said, 'you know Ed, the problem is not with the Filipino community, but within the embassy itself'. We had to revamp the entire system, explains His Excellency, "and literally start over. I brought in my own people to Bahrain, which is somewhat unusual to do. Usually an incoming ambassador is allowed to bring one or two individuals with him."

Citing this situation as one of his top challenges while in office, the Ambassador defined the problem as being that the then current staff was not reaching out properly into the Filipino community.

Ambassador Maglaya believes that the best thing about Bahrain's Filipino community is the fact that there is only one club, albeit quite varied. He explains that under the club's umbrella exist 17-20 core groups where people of like professions gather, such as architects, engineers, accountants and technicians. In addition to profession, members are also grouped according to their ethnic provinces, as well as sports. Did you know that the Philippine Club has its own go-cart team?

I asked His Excellency how this need for building and selling translated into Bahrain's 'Bahrainisation' program, particularly within the hospitality industry, and the subsequent impact upon the Filipino-dominated hospitality and restaurant workforce.

"I don't think it will have a major effect. Bahrain has many four- and five-star hotels. Besides Bahraini staff, these hotels need other people to run them. As long as there are people crossing the causeway from Saudi Arabia, and with plans to link Qatar with another causeway, Bahrain will need workers. They need Bahrainis to learn the hotel industry, but of course, they also will need more people to staff the hotels and restaurants. I think the Filipinos and Bahrainis coexist excellently in the work they do in this area."

Neither the Philippine or Bahrain governments place a limit on the number of Filipinos coming into Bahrain as long as they enter with a work visa and are properly employed. "We try to do that now because we had a lot of people coming

here on tourist and visit visas, and that's what actually started many of the problems," says Ambassador Maglaya.

Labor Relations

Transitioning into personal opinions about the archaic sponsorship system, Ambassador Maglaya responds: "I think most of the manpower exporting countries here in Bahrain would love to see the sponsorship system abandoned. It has no place in a free market economy. With Bahrain now trying to be one of the first free market economies here in the GCC, sponsorship definitely does not have a place there."

The Labor Management Regulatory Agency (LMRA) and ministries of Labor and Interior are all saying that individuals should be holding their own passports – not the sponsors – yet in reality, this is not happening," admits the ambassador. "This is an area we have been actively working in. The LMRA is going a great job. With the end of the sponsorship program here in Bahrain, the passport problem should also end."

His Excellency sees the Filipino labor force changing over the next few years by addressing Bahrain's vision toward greater development of the spa and health and wellness industries. "We really would like to take advantage of that. I think manpower is one of our key assets; we have caregivers, nurses and physicians, with very good reputations, working in Canada, the UK and the US to tap into."

AMA University, a national college, is probably the largest computer university in the Philippines, according to Ambassador Maglaya, and recently opened a five-hectare campus in Salmabad, Bahrain that is open to anyone. "We are very proud of AMA University, and believe it helps to change the image of Filipinos here. They are planning to put up a college of medicine and nursing also. So instead of importing manpower from the Philippines for those areas, we are now teaching Bahrainis to be nurses. The majority of the faculty is Filipinos with a blend of international staff."

As an initial foray into labor markets, Ambassador Maglaya describes the first trade fair as successful predominantly since it was achieved without any help from the Philippines' Ministry of Trade and Industry. "Fortunately, there were four or five Filipino businessmen in the private sector who responded to our call back home. That started the whole ball rolling."

Bilateral Relations

Ambassador Maglaya describes bilateral relations with Bahrain as being excellent. "We are fortunate that His Royal Highness the Prime Minister manages to go to the Philippines almost every year. He actually gels the relations between our two countries; it's quite unusual. He loves the Philippines probably as much as I love Bahrain.

We've had a series of delegations coming into Bahrain, and the Bahrain Trade & Industry minister recently conducted a successful visit in the Philippines. One of our goals is to improve our trade and commercial relations with Bahrain, as well as foreign investment from this part of the world. The GCC is now going to Asia, so we will need to address that and try to attract more Bahraini investments there."

Now into his final year that will end in March 2009, I asked the Ambassador what the Filipino community might expect going forward. "We are a growing community here," he emphasizes, "and that growth will continue."

How is an ambassador selected for assignment, and what are some of those criteria, I asked. "First, it depends on the needs of the service," His Excellency replies. "With Filipinos, it's more of a personal diplomacy. Within the community, the diplomacy to a large part is the work. Ambassadors sent to Bahrain usually have a background in Migrant Worker's Affairs since most of our problems are consular in nature involving labor disputes. Usually the most important section in embassies here is what we call 'assistance to national unit'; staff closely coordinating with our labor attaché and welfare attaché.

Because our domestic help, such as gardeners, farmhands and maids do not fall under Bahrain's labor laws, their assistance is not clearly defined. Domestic helpers fall under the Family Code, which means that the police are not allowed to enter a residence. Rights and privileges under Family Law differ, and that's why most of us here are pushing for our people to come under the Domestic section of the labor law. At least under this area they would have workman's compensation and insurance, as well as clearly defined duties and responsibilities."

First Impressions

"When I first came to Bahrain, I thought it might be a strict country," discloses the Ambassador. "But actually, I found Bahrain and its people quite modern in many ways that differed from other GCC countries. For example, after two years of working in Qatar I had never once been invited to anyone's home. Here everyone invites you! It also helps that everyone speaks English. My Arabic is very poor. You see," he admits with a sheepish smile, "when I began my studies at the American University in Cairo, the first subject I flunked was Arabic.

I love Bahrain and Bahrainis. It's a beautiful island. Because of my length of service, I have become very attached to the people and this place; I'll regret leaving. This has turned out to be one of the most enjoyable places and assignments I've had, and I've really enjoyed it. I've made wonderful friends, and hopefully I can return some day. I'm hoping to find a job that will bring me back here to the Middle East. I love this part of the world."