

Time to demand better visa treatment for Filipinos



Manny Gonzalez (The Philippine Star ⓘ) - February 15, 2020 - 12:00am

Whether you agree or not with the underlying reasons or the threatened form of reprisal, the President should be applauded for calling attention to other countries' use of visas as instruments of foreign policy – or worse, simply as means of showing contempt for us as a nation.

The President, however, should not limit his interventions to situations involving his close personal circle. The President should stand up for ALL Filipinos.

As a people, we Filipino citizens are routinely discriminated against in the matter of requiring, issuing, and processing visas, and sometimes upon arrival at our destination, too.

At different times in the past I had the chance to acquire a US, then a Hong Kong, and finally a Canadian passport. But I let these opportunities pass, and still need visas like other Filipinos. So in a way I feel the sting more.

Some countries are justified in being strict on us. Others are not.

The US is fairly strict, the fact being that too many Filipinos have abused their US visas and gone TNT. But this cloud has a silver lining. Once approved, many Filipinos get a generous 10-year B1 visa. With that visa in your passport, at most entry ports you will get through US Immigration faster than (for example) the Japanese, Singaporean, and European passport holders who didn't need visas. And US embassy personnel in Manila, both American and Filipino, are polite (in my personal experience).

A quick rundown of countries which are reasonably visa-friendly to Filipinos, all things considered: UK processing is straightforward and predictable; you can get five years if you're willing to pay extra. The downside is that you're likely to arrive at Heathrow, which can be crowded. New Zealand is simple, fast, and online, and you get two years; Australia gives one year; neither requires a personal appearance, and you just print out an email-delivered approval and carry it with your passport.

Israel, Morocco, Peru, and Brazil don't require visas for us at all. Neither do our fellow ASEAN members, such as Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Thailand. A few places will allow in most nationalities, Filipinos included, if they have a US or UK visa - a very sensible approach for smaller countries which don't see the need to be anal about allowing visitors.

So far as I'm aware, none of these "liberal to Filipinos" countries regrets their friendly policies.

But after that, the rest of the world has eccentric, unpredictable, or unexplainable attitudes on the subject of visas for Filipinos. These are the countries where our President and our Department of Foreign Affairs could possibly negotiate better visa treatment for us.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi both require visas, and can be arbitrary. My sister and her husband, a former undersecretary of Foreign Affairs and our former ambassador to the WTO in Geneva, were recently stuck in Abu Dhabi in transit, due to a cancelled flight. The airline offered them a hotel room, but outside the airport. Thus, they needed an on-the-spot emergency visa. My sister was given one, but her husband was not. Both had to sleep in the terminal.

Dubai also requires visas. Why? 20 percent of its inhabitants are already Filipinos. That makes probably 30 percent of the workers. Without us, the whole country would grind to a halt. Don't believe the claim that we will be replaced by alternate nationalities – we have a strong work ethic, bathe at least twice weekly, and don't have weird personal habits like trying to cook on airplanes. Deteriorated though our English may be, it is understandable, while the English of those other nationalities is not. Because of Dubai's need for us as workers, almost any Filipino can get a tourist visa and within a month of landing find a job and get a work permit with the full blessing of Dubai authorities. Who is protected or served by the visa requirement? It seems to be just a way of emphasizing that we are inferior.

Suggested negotiating tactic: ban all Philippine travel from, to, or through Dubai until they make us visa-free. Let's see who needs whom, more. And while we're at it, why not demand more rights for Filipino workers there? Once Dubai is sorted out, talk to Abu Dhabi. In parallel, initiate visa-free talks with Turkey, which wants to challenge the others as a hub for Asia-Europe connections.

South Korea and Japan both require visas, and don't always grant them. What is the justification for the distrust? A Filipino could never pass as a local, and if a few overstay as illegal workers, they would be doing work that their employers can't find alternate labor for. Japan has a rapidly declining population and should be glad to have a few more breeders around. South Korea will soon be in the same demographic position. In both countries, Filipino romantic partners are considered exotic, and correspondingly appreciated.

Suggested negotiating stance: an appeal to direct self-interest – by going visa-free, they will get more Philippine tourists, more often, and the occasional overstaying workers will yield a net economic or demographic benefit to them anyway.

Schengen-country visas are difficult for first-timers, and sometimes seem subject to the personal caprices of the individuals in their consulates. I know some young Filipinas who were reluctantly given visas by one Schengen country. Their intended stay was 18 days, and the visa validity was only for the exact 18 days. No allowance for delayed flights or extra sightseeing. Moreover, they were told to report back to the Makati consulate afterwards, to prove they had actually returned to the Philippines. This seemed to me both unnecessarily mean, and demeaning. Was this consular official worried that if they stayed any longer they might find a European to get pregnant by? And even if that were true, so what? (To be continued)

Moving on, there are several Latin American countries which enjoy visa-free entry to the Philippines, yet do not reciprocate with the same courtesy. Not only that, but in some cases their visa processing seems to be administered sadistically, the apparent intent being to make the Filipino beg and beg and beg before getting the visa.

My nephew recently had to go to a certain Latin country, which will not be identified except that it has fjords, faces the Pacific, and has a name which recalls spicy cooking. He applied exactly three months before his intended departure (the country doesn't entertain any earlier application), and was repeatedly tortured with red tape and arrogant, demeaning demands and behavior by the Filipino employees at the consulate. This young man has current US and past Schengen, UK, and other visas, and an ample bank balance.

The harassment was seemingly on instructions of the diplomatic officials from that country. Though his papers were complete, he was asked again and again for the same documents. He wound up going to the consulate almost fifteen times, and was on two occasions shouted at by the Filipino clerks. He was finally given a visa just 8 hours before his flight! This was after enduring three months of what can only be considered as deliberately offensive, malicious treatment. It's a shame, because most people from this country are perfectly okay persons. But just one or two petty tyrants can cause a lot of misery, while losing admirers for their country.

So for now, if you are thinking of going to a Latin American country which has fjords and faces the Pacific, and whose name reminds you of spicy cooking, my nephew suggests you abandon this idea and instead go to Norway (where he went some years ago on his honeymoon, after getting his visa in a single visit).

Observing glaciers from the author's cabin on a cruise ship. The worldwide cruise industry is highly dependent on Filipino crew, whose lives would be easier if they were better treated, visa-wise.

Now, it may seem that the Philippines has little bargaining strength with Schengen countries or odd countries around the world with nasty diplomats. But this belief is untrue. You just have to know where the vulnerability lies.

For diplomats from almost every country on earth, Manila is a plum posting, much sought after for many reasons. Life in Makati for foreigners is great, with lots of dining and entertainment, household servants, and superior social status. International schools abound, and the country-club life is readily at hand. Out-of-pocket expenses are few, so allowances can be saved for their old age. Filipinos are friendly and basically compete with each other to cater to and cuddle up with foreigners. As a result, diplomats feel like kings and frequently ask for their tours of duty in Manila to be extended.

So, Mr. President and Mr. Foreign Secretary, here's a suggestion: maintain a website for Filipinos to file complaints against foreign consulates and their personnel whether foreign or Filipino. Require complainants (who could be not just visa applicants but also those with social or professional dealings) to document their allegations of rude or plainly abusive behavior.

Once there were three proven strikes against an embassy/consulate, declare ALL of the foreigners and ALL of the Filipino staff personae non gratae (undesirable people in our official opinion). Order the foreigners to leave and the Filipinos to be fired. Only wipe the slate if and when the whole embassy and consulate, from Ambassador down to janitor, has been replaced. This is to make all of them jointly responsible for treating Filipinos with courtesy. No passing the buck and the Ambassadors claiming visas are not their responsibility. Those individual people will effectively have been expelled from Paradise, which will serve as a warning to their successors to treat Filipinos better. Meanwhile, their nationals in the Philippines will have no consular services, which will quickly raise a stink back in their home country.

(They could of course threaten to retaliate by expelling our diplomats, but we have so few embassies and consulates, and so many overseas Filipinos, that this is not a practical or credible risk.)

This strategy won't work when major policy issues are involved, such as seems to be the recent case with the US. But it will work against random diplomats who are just personally nasty, and who train their Filipino staff to look down on their countrymen.

Instead of empty curses and threats to impress the ignorant, we should have an articulated policy as just described, demanding better visa treatment for Filipinos and putting teeth behind that demand. This might result in genuine benefit for the tens of millions of Filipinos who travel or work abroad, and more respect for our country in general. Pretty soon, we would have more visa-free countries available to us, and start seeing faster turnarounds and higher "Granted" rates for most visa applications.

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(Conclusion)

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