

My Country – Wrong or Right! Ambassador's Note

By
A. H. Omari (PhD)¹

An Overview

In the generic sense, diplomatic representation is meant to harmonize inter-state relations. It is that representation that is expanded into many directions – friendly relations, economic and other 'diplomacies', negotiations, etc. In this short note, I emphasize some aspects of being an Ambassador – the individual – by looking at national interests, tacit and skills, culture, and some deliverables.

To Serve the National Interests

It is a cliché to say that an Ambassador, the person and the office s/he occupies is an extension of the Presidency (Head of State). An Ambassador is a 'personal representative' of the Head of State in whose credentials the envoy functions. As such, the main functions of the Ambassador are to safeguard, negotiate, procure and deliver national interests.² In this role, the Ambassador is a key person who occupies the frontline in the execution of the country's foreign policy, while other institutions occupy a second place in the continuum. For example, although defence policy provides the weapon of last resort, in practice, it is an executing arm of foreign policy – when diplomats fail to negotiate for the nation's vital interests, negotiations take a twist and citizens in uniform (military) are called to reinforce negotiations in terms of war.

The basic problem for an Ambassador is to identify the elements, which finally add up to national interest. Which core values are fundamental, and which are not? This and other subsequent questions become challenging because an Ambassador is a 'lone ranger' in the field. What s/he personally considers fundamental may not be so at that particular time in the sending state. This is so despite the guidelines provided to our Ambassadors – the so-called 'the Mission

¹ Ambassador, Professor and Al-Haj, Former Director, Centre for Foreign Relations, and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the State of Kuwait and the State of Qatar.

² Some national interest is non-negotiable, like sovereignty, independence, integrity, etc.

of the Missions.’ In Tanzania, that ‘Green Book’ is a just a guide. It does not provide answers to every question the Ambassador may have, and sometimes the ‘Capital’ may be irresponsive to Ambassadors’ queries. The ‘lone ranger’ must apply other methods to have her/his query solved. Meanwhile, the Ambassador is judged by the so called ‘deliverables,’ which may or may not tally with the national interests.

Tacit and Skills

The ambiguity of the national interests and more so the absence of clear guidelines, and sometimes the irresponsiveness of the ‘Capital’ would necessitate the Ambassador to use extra tacit and skills in the handling of some of the diplomatic issues. A few may be acquired through experience and training. However, most are generated by some personal integrity. It is awkward for an accredited Ambassador to use the weapon of last resort – “Let me consult my Capital” – to every case s/he encounters. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the receiving state may purposely leak out the ‘weapon’ to the diplomatic community, and may become an Ambassador’s new nick-name. The hosts may become ‘tired’ to the monotonous answer ‘let me consult my Capital.’ To our Ambassadors, some of the ambiguous questions, which are asked by unscrupulous host countries include, *inter alia*; “Is Zanzibar a state?” “Why do you kill albinos?” “Why does your government deny citizens a right to demonstrate against it?” “Why does the government refuse to have a new constitution and an independent Electoral Commission?” “Why do you abuse rights of gays and lesbians?”

Such and other questions do not need an Ambassador to consult the Capital. Some examples (below) will substantiate this fact. A good part about such questions, and the diplomatic behaviour is that the hosts may not force an Ambassador to provide an answer: to remain quiet is an answer too. This is so, especially when the Ambassador fears the spectre of being ‘grossly’ misquoted. Basically, the Ambassador is supposed to quickly understand the question, and more so, to be able to read ‘between the lines.’ The Ambassador has to know the intention and direction of the question, sometimes based on the type of bilateral relations that exist between the two countries. The Republic of Mozambique, for example, is not expected to ask questions about the independent Electoral Commission, Zanzibar being a state, etc. Western countries are expected not

only to ask such questions, but also about gay rights, why the ruling party keeps winning, etc.

To avoid being misquoted, Ambassadors are requested to read prepared speeches verbatim, if questions by the media, for example, are sent beforehand. Whenever possible, Ambassadors should avoid impromptu speeches, if situations need some speeches.

Culture and Cultural Aspects

A successful Ambassador sets to go to a receiving state with an open mind about the culture. It is important to learn a bit about the main cultural pillars of the receiving state. Some of the things some people take offence are trivial to us but count so much in other cultures.³ An Ambassador should learn quickly about what makes other societies tick, and what they stand for. An Ambassador's first lesson is how the people greet each other, and the place of, and how people associate and interact with women.

Failure to understanding the people's culture may hamper an Ambassador in accomplishing one of the basic functions of the diplomatic representation as enshrined in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961). This is the "...ascertaining by all lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state and report thereon to the sending state." This entails collection of information by legal means, information which serves as the basic raw material for foreign policy decision making and execution. Information acquisition is heavily governed by culture; hence the difference between 'closed' and 'open' societies/countries. It is extremely difficult to operate in 'closed' societies.

Respect for other people's culture is an important principle, as it becomes a requirement for other people to respect your culture as well. In most parts of the Middle East, for example, it is unbecoming to enquire about, and even greet women and wives (if you happen to see them). To an Ambassador, it is not only unbecoming, but 'undiplomatic' as well. This is also applicable even when you have been invited to dinner in somebody's home – as most of the time women and men are physically separated.

³ For example, handing over a visiting card using one hand is an insult in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. One has to use both hands in doing so.

Ambassadors worldwide are either held in high or low esteem, basically from the way they react to the culture which is not their own. Here, culture involves all the diplomatic practices, from courtesy to etiquette, symbolisms to dressing, and greetings to table manners. In most host countries, the diplomatic community single out a few Ambassadors and consider them 'crude.' 'Crudeness' may symbolize the behaviour of a particular Ambassador – the language s/he uses, mannerisms, being critical to almost everything in the host country, etc. Once labelled as such an Ambassador may find it difficult to operate in such a host country. The grapevine by the diplomatic community has an impact on both the receiving state and the Ambassador.

Steadfastness

The Ambassador should always be in defence of national interests. In this, Ambassadors should show resoluteness and resolve to what they believe in, especially as far as national interests are concerned. This principle is applied in all diplomatic transactions, but it is more crucial during a crisis in the sending state. A crisis at home necessitates the Ambassador to be close and in touch with the 'Capital' at all the time. Crises become the major problem for the Ambassador, as sometimes the Ambassador has to act in a manner which is against her/his conscience in regard to policy steps taken by her/his 'Capital.' It is in such a case that the operating paradigm for Ambassadors is: *My country, Wrong or Right*. This has to be so despite the awkwardness of the case in question. The individual Ambassador cannot have a personal input once the 'Capital' has decided in one way or another. To act and go contrary to what has been decided by the 'Capital' is tantamount to resignation by the Ambassador. And that may include the annulment of the title 'Ambassador' as well. In other words, what the Ambassador believes in should never contradict the national policy of the sending state – the 'Capital' cannot be wrong!

Deliverables

The Ambassador has to deliver. Deliverables can be according to Ambassadors' Handbook or any other directives from the 'Capital.' Ambassador's effectiveness on this is dependent on three other variables. The first is Ambassador's own qualities, which are personal – tacit and skills, innovativeness, hard work and a personal urge to leave a legacy.

The second variable is cooperation and good managerial skills. Even when the Ambassador has a full basket of personal qualities, delivery would be difficult if the element of cooperation is missing. The Ambassador must cultivate, nourish and cherish cooperation of her/his Embassy staff as well as those in the 'Capital.' Diplomatic work, especially its effectiveness is not a 'go it alone' affair. An Ambassador who thinks s/he 'knows it all' cannot succeed and deliver. However small our Embassies are, the involvement of all staff is essential for effective delivery.

And the third important variable is responsiveness, particularly of the Headquarters. If the 'Capital' is irresponsive, especially to queries from the Embassies, there is no way such outposts can effectively deliver. Responsiveness is a major factor if it is weighed against others. Responsiveness should go along with a streamlined and adequate C⁴I. The four Cs are Command, Control, Coordination and Communication, while I is Information, especially Intelligence. In other words, every department and section should do what is there to be done. If the four Cs disintegrate, it would look like expecting some milk from the unfed cow! For example, if correspondence from the Embassy is not dealt with and replied in the shortest possible and practical time, that particular Embassy cannot function normally.

A Case to Consider

After my arrival as an Ambassador in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I was duty bound to make some courtesy calls as diplomatic work demands. I purposely skipped to do so to the Minister of Agriculture, despite my knowledge that the Kingdom had set aside some SAR 1.0/- billion (almost TShs. 420/- billion)⁴ in banks for Saudi investors to borrow and invest in the world. They were to invest elsewhere, where they could get land for agriculture and animal husbandry. This action aimed to overcome some Saudi (and Moslem) religious challenges.⁵ Investors were to supply local markets, and extra amounts were to be shipped to the Kingdom.

Before my going to the Kingdom, several Saudi investors had come to Tanzania.

⁴ Being in 2010, the amount was a lot of money.

⁵ The Royal Saudi government wanted to ensure that grain and fodder were grown in a *halal* way, i.e. fertilizers were to be from *halal* sources (for example, not from swine dung). Likewise, the government wanted to ensure that animals were *slaughtered* in a Moslem way, and not just *killed*.

They could not invest on land due to the fact that the land in question was not *sold* to them, and they did, therefore, not have title deeds in their names and in perpetuity for their upcoming generations.⁶ I had not wanted to get myself embroiled in such an argument.

It was about two weeks after my arrival in Riyadh that I was ‘summoned’ by the Saudi Minister of Agriculture. His Highness had about thirty or so officers with him. To my surprise, there were no ‘niceties.’ Instead, His Highness the Minister went forward to tell me why he summoned me:

Mr. Ambassador, your country says it invites investors in agriculture and animal husbandry. Instead, you repel them. All land in your country belongs to one person, the President, who is not even born in the Presidency. He is just elected. And that person does not allow land to be sold to investors. Our banks need to be presented with proof of land sale transactions before loans are issued. Now, Mr. Ambassador, after this meeting, go and advise your government to scrap your stupid land law and thereafter allow Saudi investors to purchase land for investment. OK?

Although my head was spinning, I found a way out. First, I was representing a country with a ‘stupid’ land law! Second, my President was just ‘elected’ and not born (hereditary, like kingdoms). And, third, repulsion of investors, etc. However, the first two were more painful. I had to have a cool head. My diplomatic response was as follows:

Your Highness, thank you for accommodating me this morning. Kindly, allow me to ask a simple question before I explain that most countries of the world find Tanzania attractive to invest, and investors are flocking into agriculture, particularly in value addition, energy, hospitality and tourism, infrastructure, etc. It is unfortunate if Your Highness feels that my country repels investors. But, Your Highness, suppose I have money and I am attracted to live in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, can I use my money to purchase a house to live in as mine in perpetuity, say in Riyadh, Your Highness?

As he was standing up to go, His Highness Saudi Minister of Agriculture said, “No. No. You cannot do that, because you are not a Saudi national and citizen.

⁶ This was said to be the requirement of the Saudi banks and the government, short of which an investor could not be given a loan.

You can only rent houses from Saudi nationals and citizens.” He went away the way he came in.

My Head of Chancery blamed me for what I said, threatening me of some diplomatic problems ahead. I was cool headed, because the Minister abused me. I did not abuse him. He was a bit undiplomatic.

Later on I came to learn that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enjoys to be regarded as a ‘big brother,’ and has a tendency to rank the countries they relate with – big, medium, or small. Unfortunately, that particular Minister had ranked my country, the United Republic of Tanzania as ‘small.’ That thinking and ranking might have provided him with a propensity to just speak without weighing what he was talking about and possibly to whom. He thought I would be cowed and beg to consult my ‘Capital.’ His Highness the Minister did not underscore the fact that Tanzania is a super power in its region.

Conclusion

I have at the end provided an example of how an Ambassador is guided by national interests, the use of tacit and skills, understanding of other people’s cultures, personal integrity and innovativeness. My question to the Minister was meant to safeguard Tanzania’s land law, whether wrong or right, is a law of my country. I could not allow someone else to dictate what land laws are good for the United Republic. The Minister was projecting his country’s strength, and he failed to predict the reaction of the Ambassador. And, the Minister’s diatribe was something not to consult the ‘Capital’ about.