

Wednesday, January 31, 2018

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Time for an overhaul of labor migration policy

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PRESIDENT Rodrigo Duterte's decision to suspend the deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) to Kuwait following reports of abuses on our fellow citizens could not be more apt and timely.

The pause should give the government a bit of time to reconsider the "exportation" of its people, a five-decade old policy that is due for a change especially now that the government has been undertaking major economic and political reforms. The thinking should start now for this is the kind of change that will take years to study and implement so as to avoid disruptions to the economy.

Certainly, the Philippine economy benefits from the foreign remittances that are being sent in by the 10 million Filipinos abroad. But all the past governments had become too dependent on it, with the development of local industries and businesses neglected and local job creation kept static.

The other negative effects of labor migration have not been properly addressed as well. We're talking about the disintegration of families, the culture of materialism, and the weakening of nationalism that have cropped up as a result of this policy. These are destroying the social fabric of our nation.

For decades, everyone has lamented the "brain drain" that we see all around the Philippines. We lack doctors, nurses, medical workers, scientists, engineers, architects, construction workers, domestic helpers, chefs, and hotel and restaurant workers,

and other important workers - we've been losing them to better-paying jobs abroad.

Building a nation needs having all these skilled workers pitching in to help their particular sector of society. Instead of having a role in the development of the country, these workers are using their skills to help other countries, already rich and developed, to become even more prosperous.

There is only one sector where we have an oversupply of workers, and these are the career politicians, especially in the Senate and Congress. Unfortunately, these are the people who will never leave for here they get paid very, very well to grandstand and criticize anything who will get them media coverage so they can get re-elected again.

The Philippine economy has not been able to generate enough jobs for the country's 40-million labor force. The problem has been exacerbated by the high population growth rate with about 1 million young people entering the work force every year.

To solve the twin problems of poverty and unemployment, we need only to look to our neighbor China for ideas on how to go about it. In just a few decades, China was able to lift 800 million people out of poverty. That's eight times our own population. It's a remarkable feat that even the World Bank has been forced to acknowledge as a historic development in the world of nations.

China's Communist Party rulers say their vision is of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." It is also really "capitalism with Chinese

characteristics." They promoted entrepreneurship; which the Chinese have the knack for, but which the state supported through its business programs, research facilities, and financing schemes.

The Chinese also have a key cultural advantage - they are long-term thinkers. They have institutionalized the use of "think tanks" in all sectors of their economy. These research-based groups are allied with key industries, and they help the management team plan and strategize each company's growth.

Another key to China's success is the leadership of the government in prioritizing "mass entrepreneurship and innovation." It has encouraged businesses to invest not only in the export sector, for which it is number one in the world, but now also in the high-tech industry. One of those who heeded the call to innovate is China's most famous tech entrepreneur, the billionaire Jack Ma of Alibaba.

Contrary to Western propaganda, private businesses are very much thriving in China, and recent data even shows their revenues are rising faster than those of state-owned agencies.

Job creation should be adopted as a new policy priority of the Duterte administration. Labor and Employment Secretary Silvestre H. Bello III should stop posturing for the peace process, which his boss Duterte has already declared as over. Bello needs to come up with an innovative employment generation program, one that is radical and will ensure that we can reintegrate any Filipino abroad who wants to come home and work here.

✶ OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS (OFW)
✶ MIGRATION