

Bagong Bayani: Tracing the Reverence and Portrayal of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Philippine Political Discourse

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Introduction

The Philippines is globally renowned as a labor exporting country that facilitates migration flows of its Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), having a fourth of its labor force deployed overseas as OFWs since 2012.¹ These individuals are often guest workers (temporary labor emigrants whose duration in a host country is dependent on the duration of their contract and have access to little or none of the rights that their naturalized counterparts enjoy) whose remittances play a crucial role in stabilizing the finances of their families and the Philippine state. According to the Central Bank of the Philippines (*Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas*), these remittances totaled

¹ Migrante International. "Philippines: Action Required to Protect the Human Rights of Filipino Migrant Workers on Death Row in the Middle East and Other Parts of the Globe," September 2016.

approximately \$27 billion in 2016, higher than overseas development assistance and foreign direct investments combined.² First coined in 1988 by former President Corazon Aquino, OFWs are now popularly known as the “*Bagong Bayani*,” or in English, modern-day heroes. This paper seeks to unpack this term and see how it has shifted over time with the institutionalization of labor exportation in the Philippines, given its prior shift between its precolonial definition (which was applied to individuals who were willing to defend their community and people) and its imposition onto Philippine national heroes who fought for Philippine national independence (wherein notions of self-sacrifice and martyrdom were incorporated due to Spanish Catholicism and its parallels with the self-sacrificing nature of Jesus Christ)³; and trace how it has been institutionalized in state affairs.

This paper also seeks to clarify what the term *Bagong Bayani* constitutes and how it humanizes or further commodifies the lived experiences of OFWs. In tracking its development as a term, I seek to determine how its perpetuation differs within political discourse and

² Tigno, Jorge V. “Protecting Filipino Overseas Migrant Workers.” In *Global Health Leadership: Case Studies from the Asia-Pacific*, edited by Mellissa Withers and Judith McCool, 135. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019.

³ Encinas-Franco, Jean. “Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as Heroes: Discursive Origins of the ‘Bagong Bayani’ in the Era of Labor Export.” *Humanities Diliman* 12, no. 2 (December 2015): 60.

how it influences the Philippines' culture of migration. This paper aims to add to the existing literature on Philippine labor migration by focusing on how the term has evolved since the Aquino Administration and its role in the Philippine political imaginary. This paper will do so by comparing and contrasting the term's use amongst President Aquino (1986-1992) and President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010), both of whom were known to have notable shifts regarding how they exemplified the term OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker) to fit their neoliberal agendas. This paper will also look at how Philippine presidential administrations use the term to invisibilize particular lived experiences of OFWs and their stories of exploitation, vulnerability, and strife to further legitimize their presidency. In doing so, I argue that *Bagong Bayani* is a fluid term that changes over time between administrations. It describes the value of OFWs under the political philosophy and schedule of the seated president. In shifting per the discourse of a particular Philippine president, the term is used to frame the lived experiences of OFWs in a variety of ways to legitimize their administration.

The Emergence of Bagong Bayani: Self-Sacrifice and the “Sacrificing Nature” of President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino (1986-1992)

The term “*Bagong Bayani*” appeared on public record in Philippine political discourse in 1988 when President Aquino included it in her presidential address to OFWs in Hong Kong employed as

Domestic Helpers. Throughout her speech, Aquino used the term *Bagong Bayani* to lift the spirits of socially stigmatized Filipina Domestic Helpers, praising them for the sacrifices they continued to make for their families and the Philippine state working abroad. An excerpt from Aquino's address reads:

“You have every reason to raise your heads up high and be proud of your labour, no matter what your job is, and no matter how this is viewed by others ... Remember that it is not only your spouses, your children and your relatives who will thank you for the sacrifices that you have experienced [made], but the entire Filipino nation. That is why you can be certain that your government will do everything to ensure your welfare.”⁴ (Translated from Tagalog to English)

The excerpt above demonstrates how Aquino framed the act of working abroad—albeit being subject to oppression and social stigma in their host countries—as the source of an OFW's heroism. This is mainly seen in the fact that she explicitly mentions how the social ascription of *Bagong Bayani* is applied regardless of an OFW's occupation, cementing the notion that the title *Bagong Bayani* is ascribed to all OFWs. This directly parallels the ideas of martyrdom and self-sacrifice attached to Philippine national heroes as previously

⁴ Ibid, 61.

mentioned: framing the act of working abroad as an individual sacrificial act that is used to advance the collective good.⁵

The emphasized framing of seeking work abroad as a voluntary act of self-sacrifice worthy of heroic praise and title by Aquino was a direct reflection of her political philosophy, agenda, and image as a president. In doing so, I argue that Aquino had also implicitly justified her administration's political prowess and capability and her capacity as a president through the exemplification of OFWs as *Bagong Bayani*. This can be seen in how Aquino's presidential campaign against Ferdinand Marcos was framed and viewed as an act of "self-sacrifice" needed to rid the Philippines of its dictatorship under Marcos—Aquino continuously insisted that she preferred not to be a presidential candidate in 1986.⁶ Aquino rose to prominence following the assassination of her husband, Benigno Aquino, a prominent political critic of President Ferdinand Marcos, with her ascension to the presidency being framed by Aquino as a need to answer the calls of the public and advance the needs of the public good. Aquino solidified the notion that her campaign was for the greater good and not a product of individual political desire. She required a million

⁵ Rodriguez, Robyn Magalit. "New National Heroes, Patriotism and Citizenship Reconfigured." In *Migrants for Export*, 75–92. Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

⁶ Col, Jeanne-Marie. "Managing Softly in Turbulent Times: Corazon C. Aquino, President of the Philippines." In *Women as Political Leaders*, 21. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

signatories to express their desire for her to run as a president. Furthermore, in explicitly mentioning how reverence as a *Bagong Bayani* triumphs the social value ascribed to the occupation of Filipina domestic helpers, it can be argued that Aquino was also drawing on the justification that she was a solid and capable leader worthy of the respect shown onto her male counterparts. This is reflected in her address to a group of businesspersons in 1987, wherein she noted:

“The issue that really brought you here. The question you all really want to ask is: Can she hack it? Isn’t she weak? ... These are the questions that were asked by all those who have openly challenged my power, authority, and resolve, and who have suffered for it ... Although I am a woman and physically small, I have blocked all doors to power except elections in 1992.”⁷

The voluntary nature underpinning the term *Bagong Bayani* as used by Aquino reflected her administration’s priorities of ensuring individual agency, liberty, and freedom to directly contrast the suppression of said rights under Marcos’ dictatorship. Aquino positioned her administration as the primary facilitator of individual migration labor flows out of the Philippines, democratically facilitating the “Filipino’s desire to exercise their personal liberty in

⁷ Ibid, 36.

seeking greener pastures and voluntarily sending remittances.”⁸ In doing so, Aquino fostered a Filipino imaginary wherein the desire to seek employment abroad is completely voluntary and devoid of any structural push factors, and where the emigration of *Bagong Bayani* is solely out of the heroic calling to ameliorate the condition of their families back home and their country. This touches upon a common criticism that was made throughout Aquino’s presidency in that her administration did not sufficiently back its anti-Marcos rhetoric with proper policies or programs to address issues,⁹ instead emphasizing the democratic rights and process lost in the previous presidential administration.

The Re-envisioned Bagong Bayani: Filipino par excellence and the Economic Agenda of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s Administration (2001-2010)

Contrasting her presidential predecessors’ sacrificial image imposed on *Bagong Bayani*, President Arroyo’s administration explicitly framed the *Bagong Bayani* as a subject of national pride and examples of the ideal OFW. In their labor abroad, the latter brought economic prosperity and modernity to the Philippines. Under the Arroyo administration, the image of a *Bagong Bayani* was no longer

⁸ Encinas-Franco, Jean. “Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as Heroes: Discursive Origins of the ‘Bagong Bayani’ in the Era of Labor Export.” *Humanities Diliman* 12, no. 2 (December 2015): 64.

⁹ Col, Jeanne-Marie. “Managing Softly in Turbulent Times: Corazon C. Aquino, President of the Philippines.” In *Women as Political Leaders*, 14–42. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

highlighted by the “themes of trauma, violence, exploitation, and abandonment,”¹⁰ but rather focused on their positive effect on the Philippine economy through remittances, their attraction of foreign investment into the Philippines, and as individual global Philippine ambassadors.¹¹ In doing so, the source of an OFW’s title as a *Bagong Bayani* was no longer their voluntary sacrificial act of labor emigration but their positive economic effect on the Philippines, their ability to bring the Philippines onto the world stage, and their living embodiment as extensions of the Philippine state. This stark shift in framing can be seen in the following speech delivered by Arroyo to OFWs in November 2004:

“When I see you, I become even more optimistic. Your regular remittances play a major role in keeping our domestic economy from sliding down. Thank you. This is a big contribution not only to your families but also to every Filipino.... And while your continuous remittances indeed serve well to keep our economy afloat, I encourage our overseas Filipinos to make additional efforts for us to overcome the massive challenge that our country faces today. ... And so, I appeal to you, let’s help each other. Help

¹⁰ Serquiña, Oscar Tantoco. “‘The Greatest Workers of the World’: Philippine Labor Out-Migration and the Politics of Labeling in Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s Presidential Rhetoric.” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37, 2016, no. 3 (2016): 208.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 219.

your relatives more. Go beyond the call of duty because in the end these concerned efforts will benefit an entire race from which a new generation of Filipinos will emerge to carry on a legacy of love for family, love for country, love for life.”¹²

The excerpt above demonstrates how Arroyo omitted any mention of sacrifice, exploitation, and oppression from the concept of an OFW. Instead, her rhetoric created an imagination wherein the *Bagong Bayani* was a source of economic change for the Philippines and the Filipino people: economic heroes who continued to work for the collective good through the provision of remittances and investment.

The Arroyo administration was arguably the first to explicitly commodify OFWs through the term *Bagong Bayani*, holding a dual role as cheap commodified human labor for export¹³ and a source of national pride and economic empowerment. Throughout her presidency, Arroyo framed herself “as not only the head of state responsible for a nation of 80 million people, but also the CEO of a global Philippine enterprise of 8 million Filipinos who live and work abroad.”¹⁴ Aquino went further, stating in August 2005 at the National

¹² Ibid, 217.

¹³ Rodriguez, Robyn M. “Migrant Heroes: Nationalism, Citizenship and the Politics of Filipino Migrant Labor.” *Citizenship Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002): 341–56.

¹⁴ Serquina, Oscar Tantoco. “‘The Greatest Workers of the World’: Philippine Labor Out-Migration and the Politics of Labeling in Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s Presidential Rhetoric.” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37, 2016, no. 3 (2016): 208.

Export Congress, that the Philippines' "greatest export, and that she must pay homage to them ... are our overseas Filipinos who are eight million strong and are the backbone of the new global workforce."¹⁵

This rhetoric demonstrates how OFWs are commodified as individuals, having their humanity reduced to being seen as sources of profit and economic opportunity for the Philippine state. Arroyo used this language to consistently promote the OFW to foreign nations and employers, emphasizing what it can bring to other countries as a state-brokered export product. The explicit commodification of OFWs directly contrasts with statements made at the Senate of the Philippines in response to criticisms that the Philippine state was treating its OFWs as products for export in 1995. The government responded to such complaints by asserting that "it was a mistake to describe the government's policy as exporting the country's unemployed labour. That is not the policy of this administration."¹⁶

Despite the striking shift in the use and framing of *Bagong Bayani* between the Aquino and Arroyo administrations, Arroyo also used the term *Bagong Bayani* and OFWs themselves to gain political legitimacy. Having been seated as a result of the second People Power Revolution—the first having ushered in Aquino's presidency—Arroyo

¹⁵ Ibid, 214.

¹⁶ Encinas-Franco, Jean. "The Language of Labor Export in Political Discourse: 'Modern-Day Heroism' and Constructions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)." *Philippine Political Science Journal* 34, 2013, no. 1 (2013): 104.

faced staunch political opposition and criticism.¹⁷ However, unlike Aquino, Arroyo was not viewed as a saint, a madonna, or a hero; nor did she enjoy political support near Aquino's throughout her administration. Arroyo's administration was met with such low levels of support that she was known as "the great compromiser, due to her willingness to accommodate anybody able to help her retain her presidency."¹⁸ The importance of OFWs for Arroyo's administration lay in their ability to participate in transnational politics and vote. This notion was cemented by framing them as extensions of the Philippine state and the Filipino people. Arroyo's discourse surrounding *Bagong Bayani* did not solely emphasize their agency in positively affecting the economic condition of the Philippines but the political state as well. Arroyo backed this sentiment through policies such as the 2003 Overseas Absentee Voting Act and the 2003 Citizenship Retention and Reacquisition Act. The former granting OFWs the ability to vote in Philippine national elections while working or living abroad, and the latter legalized dual citizenship.¹⁹ Through these policies, Arroyo not only identified OFWs as a mobile source of political support but tapped into a newly-formed voting bloc. In touting her

¹⁷ Hutchcroft, Paul D. "The Arroyo Imbroglia in the Philippines." *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 1 (January 2008): 141–55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁹ Serquina, Oscar Tantoco. "'The Greatest Workers of the World': Philippine Labor Out-Migration and the Politics of Labeling in Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's Presidential Rhetoric." *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37, 2016, no. 3 (2016): 212.

administration's prowess in utilizing the Bagong Bayani's agency to affect the Philippines positively, she framed herself as the political leader who facilitated their political and economic ties in the Philippines—a steward of modernization.

Arroyo also courted OFWs by framing them as transmigrants. According to Eric Gutierrez, they are “immigrants whose daily lives consist of transnational interactions and whose public identities revolves around two or more states.”²⁰ This is notable, as Arroyo emphasized in her speech “Survive, Compete, and Succeed” (2006), that “wherever Filipinos go, they are still Filipinos. They care for their families, they care for our country, and they build up our housing industry and so many other industries in our country.”²¹ As shown in this excerpt, Arroyo solidified the notion that Filipinos are transmigrants—a social fact that she exploited by providing political pathways for OFWs to express their transnational Filipino identity. Through this, she implicitly created a distinction that to retain their status as *Bagong Bayani*, OFWs were expected to positively affect the Philippines by voting and supporting an administration that facilitated

²⁰ Gutierrez, Eric. “The Filipino Diaspora: Changing the Terms of Reference.” In *De Olde Worlde: Views of Filipino Migrants in Europe*, edited by Filomenita Mongaya Hoegsholm, 398. Philippine Migration Research Network (PMRN) and Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), 2007.

²¹ Serquina, Oscar Tantoco. “‘The Greatest Workers of the World’: Philippine Labor Out-Migration and the Politics of Labeling in Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s Presidential Rhetoric.” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37, 2016, no. 3 (2016): 216.

economic modernization and sending their regular remittances and investments.

Bagong Bayani: A Misrepresentative Term for the OFW Experience?

As *Bagong Bayani*, OFWs continue to be met with much fanfare in the Philippines upon their return. Their heroic status is affirmed with personal greetings from the President upon arrival at the airport, a dedicated week in their honor, and a government-sponsored awards ceremony for the most exemplary among them.²² Contrary to their heralded status as *Bagong Bayani*, most OFWs have not been the recipient of full legal or labor protections from the Philippine government when working abroad. Often, they essentially become partial citizens abroad due to the failure of multiple administrations to address the structural issues that make them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Gutierrez asserts that OFWs are to be considered partial citizens since they do not enjoy full legal protection in practice from the Philippine government when abroad.²³ As will be demonstrated in the following section, the Philippine state itself often contributes to their exploitation to maintain its status as a global broker of labor

²² Rodriguez, Robyn Magalit. "New National Heroes, Patriotism and Citizenship Reconfigured." In *Migrants for Export*, 75. Minneapolis, MN, US: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

²³ Gutierrez, Eric. "The Filipino Diaspora: Changing the Terms of Reference." In *De Olde Worlde: Views of Filipino Migrants in Europe*, edited by Filomenita Mongaya Hoegsholm, 398. Philippine Migration Research Network (PMRN) and Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), 2007.

export, despite the respect and value expected according to their status as *Bagong Bayani*.

The term *Bagong Bayani* shifts with the seated president's philosophy, agenda, and principles. Yet, I also argue that what has stayed constant between the two administrations—and all of those having followed Aquino—is their use of the term to distract from their administrations' neglect of the welfare of OFWs. For example, Aquino's rhetoric conveniently omits the Philippine government's failure to address national issues that have pushed OFWs to emigrate to frame labor emigration as entirely voluntary. These push factors mainly result from sluggish economic development in the Philippines and ineffective initiatives to mitigate the issue. This includes high national unemployment and underemployment levels, with the Philippines experiencing an unemployment rate of 9.6% in 1988.²⁴ This subsequently led to an increase in informal and contracted labor and a consistent decrease in agricultural jobs in rural areas, exacerbated by both the Marcos and the Aquino administration's failure to redistribute land to farmers and subsidize the expansion of crops grown in the Philippines.²⁵ Which caused the economic

²⁴ National Statistics Office. "TABLE 5.1B - Unemployed Persons and Unemployment Rate, Philippines: 1987 - 2011." Philippine Statistics Authority, 2011. https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Tab5-1B_1.pdf.

²⁵ Col, Jeanne-Marie. "Managing Softly in Turbulent Times: Corazon C. Aquino, President of the Philippines." In *Women as Political Leaders*, 32. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

displacement of farmers and other laborers in the Philippines' agricultural sector, who, like many Filipinos' loss in wages, were exacerbated by a staggering 7.4% increase in the Philippines' Consumer Price Index reported in February 1988,²⁶ pushing them to seek higher-paying labor opportunities abroad.

Under the Arroyo administration, however, the term *Bagong Bayani* was notably used to render the exploitation and vulnerability of OFWs invisible. This was done by steering attention away from how the Philippine state brokers its OFWs as partial citizens and guest workers abroad, which leaves them susceptible to exploitation and abuse due to their lack of rights and dependent on their employer for legal status. Further exacerbating this is the Philippine government's record of rarely intervening, except when prompted by mass protests and/or the mobilization of non-governmental organizations (i.e., Migrante, Gabriela, etc.), out of fear of losing a potential source of foreign investment and remittances. The interplay between the phenomena above has resulted in the Arroyo administration having been found negligent in handling multiple cases of femicide involving Overseas Filipina Workers and having failed to prevent the systematic abuse and exploitation they experience when working abroad.

²⁶ National Statistics Office. "Table 3. Year-on-Year Changes of the CPI in Percent by Area, By Commodity Group." Philippine Statistics Authority, March 5, 1998. <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/attachments/itsd/cpi/19980209.pdf>.

Some of the most notable cases include: Jocelyn Dulnuan (Canada, 2007) who was found stabbed 27 times in her employer's residence, where she was employed under Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program;²⁷ Honiefait Ritalia Kamiosawa (Japan, 2008), an entertainer whose dismembered remains were found scattered across suitcases in Tokyo;²⁸ and Eugenia Baja (Saudi Arabia, 2008), a domestic worker in Saudi's *Kafala* system, who died from starvation at the hands of her employer.²⁹ Across all three cases, the Arroyo administration painted their deaths as isolated incidents rather than a product of the lack of support and protection given to Overseas Filipina Workers when working abroad.³⁰ According to Stephanie Santos, the Arroyo administration denied the systematic killings of Overseas Filipina Workers at the hands of their employers and shifted the blame onto the victims themselves: by claiming that Kamiosawa was responsible for her death, as she allegedly moonlighted as an illegal sex worker;³¹ that Baja committed suicide by repeatedly banging her head across her employer's bathroom, while a Saudi autopsy noted that her death was a result of ulcers;³² and falsely accused Dulnuan of being an

²⁷ Santos, Stephanie. "The Death of Eugenia Baja: Femicide and Transnational Feminist Organizing among Filipina Migrant Workers." *Amerasia Journal* 35, no. 2 (2009): 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

undocumented worker to absolve the government of the responsibility of repatriating her remains.³³

The reverence attached to the term *Bagong Bayani* and the emphasis on heroism was used by the Arroyo administration to distract from their responsibility to alter the structural factors and facilitate the working conditions that led to the deaths of Baja, Dulnuan and Kamiosawa. A common thread between Dulnuan and Baja was that they were brokered by the Philippine state to be employed in the private sphere, which is notable as laborers working in the said sphere are often hidden and work “outside the purview of state regulation”³⁴ and protection, resulting in a greater likelihood of them being exploited and abused. Furthermore, there are essential similarities regarding the working conditions and vulnerability of Overseas Filipina Workers employed under Saudi Arabia’s *Kafala* system and Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Program at Baja and Dulnuan’s death acted as structural factors that led to their exploitation. Among these factors was the entrenched dependency that Overseas Filipina workers under both labor schemes had on their employer, as their legal status was limited to the duration of their labour contract and dependent on

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Mackie, Vera, Anne-Marie Hilsdon, Maila Stivens, and Martha Macintyre. “The Contemplacion Fiasco: The Hanging of a Filipino Domestic Worker in Singapore.” In *Human Rights and Gender Politics*, 167-168. Routledge, 2000

their employer's sponsorship.³⁵ This was further exacerbated by the fact that under both schemes, laborers were either barred or highly discouraged from switching employers of their own accord: The Canadian program only permitted Live-in Caregivers to switch employers after the first two years of working for the same employer, and its Saudi counterpart granted employers the ability to let go and transfer domestic workers as they please.³⁶ This allowed laborers under both schemes to be overworked, denied their immigration documents and payment, and have their labor contracts breached. These labor conditions did not stray far from those experienced by Kamiosawa and other Overseas Filipina Workers. They entered Japan as entertainers, despite working in a relatively more public sector than Baja and Dulnuan. These shared labor conditions included the requirement to live in spaces that were owned or controlled by their employer, the loss of control over their labor mobility due to the confiscation of their passports and other immigration documents by their employer, and working in conditions that contradicted those outlined in their employment contracts.³⁷

³⁵ Cheng, Shu-Ju Ada. "State and Immigration Regulations: Shared Experiences of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Canada." *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal* 4, no. 2–3 (2014): 259–68.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ogaya, Chiho. "Intergenerational Exploitation of Filipino Women and Their Japanese Filipino Children: 'Born out of Place' Babies as New Cheap Labor in Japan." *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 1 (July 2, 2020): 61.

Flor Contemplacion, the Filipino Masses' Bagong Bayani and a Contested Symbol of the OFW's Plight

These labor conditions did not stray far from those experienced by Kamiosawa and other Overseas Filipina Workers. They entered Japan as entertainers, despite working in a relatively more public sector than Baja and Dulnuan. These shared labor conditions included the requirement to live in spaces that were owned or controlled by their employer, the loss of control over their labor mobility due to the confiscation of their passports and other immigration documents by their employer, and working in conditions that contradicted those outlined in their employment contracts.³⁸ As an Overseas Filipina Worker employed as a domestic servant, she was subject to the same repressive working conditions that Baja, Dulnuan, and Kamiosawa endured.³⁹ However, the significance of her case was not necessarily the Philippine state's hesitancy to address her working conditions, but its negligence to provide her with an ample amount of legal and consular support throughout her case.

The Contemplacion case began in 1991. After visiting her friend Dalia Maga (an Overseas Filipina Worker working as a domestic servant), the Singaporean authorities found Maga and her

³⁸ Hilsdon, Anne-Marie. "What the Papers Say: Representing Violence Against Overseas Contract Workers." *Violence against Women* 9, no. 6 (2003): 699.

³⁹ Cheng, Shu-Ju Ada. "State and Immigration Regulations: Shared Experiences of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Canada." *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal* 4, no. 2-3 (2014): 259-68.

employer's autistic son's (Nicholas Huang) lifeless bodies.⁴⁰ Upon their arrival, the son was found to have been drowned, and Maga strangled to death, with Contemplacion having been framed as mentally unfit. She allegedly strangled Maga and drowned her son out of spite for not accepting her *balikbayan* (goods that Overseas Filipinos send to their loved ones back in the Philippines).

Contemplacion was later arrested and detained, appeared in the trial, and was executed by hanging in 1995.⁴¹ This paper will not focus on whether Contemplacion was innocent of the charges laid against her but will focus on the lack of support given to her as an Overseas Filipina Worker by her government. Contemplacion's death became highly publicized amongst Filipinos, leading to mass protests and calls for the Philippine government to launch its investigation and inquiry into her case and take responsibility for the apparent lack of due process.

This prompted the government, led by then-President Fidel Ramos (1992-1998), to establish the Presidential Fact-Finding and Policy Advisory Commission for the Protection of Overseas Filipinos in 1995, informally known as the Gancayo Commission. Despite her heralded status as a Bagong Bayani, the Gancayo Commission's findings confirmed the arguments brought forward by non-

⁴⁰ Chew, Valerie. "Flor Contemplacion." In *Singapore Infopedia*. Singapore: National Library Board of Singapore, 2009.

https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1551_2009-07-31.html.

⁴¹ Ibid.

governmental associations and others who took part in the protest. For instance, the commission noted that Contemplacion “was likely to have been wrongfully advised by the Philippine consulate to claim insanity and admit to committing the crime to receive a lesser sentence,”⁴² reportedly confessed to the crime in Tagalog (which was then translated into English by an embassy interpreter), and then signed in the absence of a lawyer. The commission found that the Philippine Embassy did not take due diligence in ensuring that she had access to legal representation and counsel. The “Philippine Embassy officials in Singapore...had no record of her case. They simply did not care.”⁴³ The Ramos administration forced the Foreign Secretary and Labor Secretary to resign and recalled several diplomatic and consular staff in Singapore in response to the findings.⁴⁴ In doing so, the Ramos administration used them as scapegoats for the administration’s failure to ensure the protection of rights for OFWs like Contemplacion. It absolved themselves of responsibility by reducing the cause of the injustices to the passivity and negligence of a few officials.

The publicity of Contemplacion’s case catapulted her into becoming regarded as a Bagong Bayani by the Filipino masses and in Filipino history textbooks. In addition, she became a source of

⁴² Ibid, 25.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 34.

mobilization for multiple Philippines-based non-governmental organizations, which called for the increased provision of labor protections and the assurance of better working conditions by the Philippine state. The uproars surrounding her death led to the ratification of the 1995 Magna Carta for Overseas Workers, which re-emphasized the Philippine state's role in assuring its overseas workers' protection and rights while abroad. However, despite the passage of this act, the Philippine government still maintains a dismal record in providing its detained OFWs adequate labor protections with no legal representation and/or intervention from the Philippine state when an OFW is arrested or investigated, and no private lawyers are provided during prosecution. Additionally, there remains a strong inclination for the Philippine state to rely on executive clemency without considering other possible legal options.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The term *Bagong Bayani* ("Modern Day Heroes") has been ascribed to OFWs since the Aquino administration, shifting from living embodiments of "self-sacrifice" to "global Philippine ambassadors and exemplary Filipinos." Unfortunately, as demonstrated throughout this paper, the term *Bagong Bayani* is often

⁴⁵ Migrante International. "Philippines: Action Required to Protect the Human Rights of Filipino Migrant Workers on Death Row in the Middle East and Other Parts of the Globe," September 2016.

used to legitimize and perpetuate the seated president's philosophy, principles, and agenda. In promoting the notion that OFWs are heroic because they possess values and/or support principles often associated with the incumbent administration, Philippine presidents like Aquino and Arroyo effectively molded OFWs into a revered extension of themselves and their administrations. This reverence, however, can also be used to distract from the structural issues that plagued their administrations' policy regimes regarding labor emigration—ultimately serving as a tool to protect the seated president's legitimacy.

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https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1551_2009-07-31.html.
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