

IMPORTANCE OF HONORARY CONSULS IN MODERN DIPLOMACY

Posted on June 2, 2024 by Edmond



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In an age of anger built around misleading territorial aspirations and a clash of civilizations, diplomacy is more relevant now than ever before. The art of diplomatic conversations, positioning, engagement and negotiation is critical in holding the global balance from being disrupted.

Honorary Consulates headed by an Honorary Consul represent a sovereign, integral and recognized part of the diplomatic and consular representation in international relations and foreign affairs. This institution can be traced back to Greece, China, India, and the Middle East from the 8th century, although the concept of consuls and particularly honorary consuls - have meant different things to different civilizations. The origin of Consuls predates the office of Permanent Ambassadors by almost two millennia according to historical research and as stated by Curtis Doebbler although a more formal structure may have been lacking then. In an environment brewing with complexities, Foreign Ministries now need to identify strategic honorary consuls in whom a long-term investment will reap rewards of unimagined proportions. Nations who have refrained from establishing or receiving Honorary Consuls ever since the Vienna Convention met, stand to lose in the race of a new world order and it is in their own internal interest to revise their obsolete foreign policies.

Diplomatic engagement

I would advice Foreign Ministries to look at Honorary Consuls a bit strategically. Other than being an important structural fuse to aid the Embassy in the receiving country or to support consular requirements, honorary consuls can play an effective role in building national interests around the world, through the existing network besides diaspora connect. Countries must from time to time also discuss national development plans with honorary consulates which can act as an enabler to broaden aspirations, build educational, commercial, cultural, trade and supply chain systems of sustainable value. Honorary consuls must be appointed by the sending country in cities of growing value which have potential to achieve tangible goals as digitalization, globalization and commerce - post COVID-19 have shifted traditional diplomacy to digital diplomacy. Modernizing the scope of Honorary Consul to critically aid the Foreign Ministry and the Embassy, particularly around socio-political situations emerging globally is absolutely essential to maintain strategic diplomatic balance and goodwill. For this, honorary consuls will have to possess basic skills of practical diplomacy and reasonable scholarship.



Regulating rogue consuls

The Vienna Convention recognizes that honorary consuls who have previously been appointed for

duties, established an efficient mechanism in complementing international relations and diplomacy. Many countries have grown in abundance due to active engagement of Honorary Consuls. Nevertheless, there have been instances in the past where Honorary Consuls have misused their office trading it for rogue diplomacy and furthered anti-social and at times anti-national interests without any integrity. While there are many instances of diplomats also having misused their positions, privileges - on a general note, there must be zero tolerance shown for such attitudes and anyone trading integrity and ethics both of self and sending country must be thrown out at the threshold by the sending country. Doing a background verification is important to prevent natural creation of rogue consuls.

Why security and immunity matters

Providing security and immunity remains guarded in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations' International Treaty - however it has not been fully understood by many local and regional governments around the world. Many governments and police officials still take the matter casually without any application of seriousness or without comprehending International Treaty in place.

It is necessary that the sending country and the stationed mission always impress upon local (receiving) governments to provide for round the clock police security officer (PSO) to Honorary Consulates as national sovereignty cannot be negotiated at any time and also as public reaction, anger, motivations are unpredictable in today's times where opinions are proliferating and conclusions drawn at the drop of a hat. Common logic explains that honorary consuls are highly educated, widely networked and experienced and above all serve the sending country in honorary capacity, hence must be safeguarded from any general or even perceived threats.

Many a times, local governments in oversight, are unable to understand international treaty and the regulations that bind it. Particularly diplomacy is less understood beyond national capitals in most parts of the world, it thus becomes very crucial to not ignore the safety and security of Honorary Consuls operating in challenging environments and often with only local resources at their disposal. At times, honorary consuls reach far fetched remote locations to scale up needs of sending countries, which at times established diplomatic missions may find challenging.

Beyond business and industry

Often, foreign ministries and embassies look out for industry-based business folks to be appointed as Honorary Consuls. But the problem here is that industry folks don't necessarily have diplomatic acumen barring a few honorable exceptions, which must be essential for such appointments if the sending country wants to leap frog ahead and have diplomatic gains cutting across sectors. Additionally, while Consular officials may try to extend consular assistance to the citizens in need, visionary honorary consuls can build breakthrough diplomacy like never before which often

diplomats on short missions and on regular transfers may find it very difficult as Honorary Consuls leverage local goodwill that cuts across years. Hence sending governments must look at investing in Honorary Consuls who demonstrate a track record of growth, of leadership and above all having historical and diplomatic knowledge of reasonable intellect. Foreign governments would actually do a disservice to their job & citizens if they only pursue rich industry folks as national interests can never be achieved in such a manner and generations can never be healed by such appointments, unless palpable passion is visible in the veins of Consuls.

Last Remarks

In times marked by war, migration, economic uncertainties, climate change, pandemics, the job of honorary consuls and creation of honorary consulates is very crucial to all countries including those who have career diplomats in plenty at their disposal because existing diplomatic missions are no longer sufficient to manage growing aspirations and may be overwhelmed with foreign policy matters even in ordinary times.

But selecting the Honorary Consul wisely is important, someone whose expression is built through kind deeds, forms of assistance, generous actions and works of justice, in favour of a better world, in favour of a more egalitarian world.