

Philippines and Morocco Celebrate Golden Jubilee



by Hajare El-Khaldi — Apr, 10, 2025

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Ambassador Baja hosted Morocco World News at the Philippines Embassy in Rabat for an exclusive interview MWN

Rabat– As the Philippines and Morocco mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations this year on April 10, Philippines Ambassador to Morocco, Leslie Baja, stressed the growing strength of their ties across political, economic, cultural, and educational fields.

To commemorate the milestone, Ambassador Baja hosted Morocco World News at the Philippines Embassy in Rabat for an exclusive interview, reflecting on five decades of collaboration and friendship between the two nations.

Meet Ambassador Leslie Baja

Accompanied by Bea Antonio, Third Secretary and Vice Consul at the Embassy, Ambassador Baja received MWN in his office, flanked by towering Filipino and Moroccan flags and surrounded by photographs with global leaders, including King Mohammed VI. A veteran of the Philippines foreign service since 1986, Baja previously served as Ambassador to Switzerland from 2011 to 2015, and Egypt from 2015 to 2018, before taking up his post in Morocco in 2021.

At the time of his appointment, Baja was in fact the first Philippines Ambassador to Rabat in over 27 years. While diplomatic relations were officially established on April 10, 1975, the Philippines did not open a resident mission in Morocco until 1979. That first embassy was closed in 1986 following the People Power Revolution, which ended Ferdinand Marcos's two-decade rule.

A second embassy opened in 1990 but shut down again in 1993 due to financial constraints. Addressing the closures, Baja clarified that they were not due to any diplomatic rift. “It was not due to any low point in ties between our countries,” he explained, attributing the decisions to broader global and domestic challenges.

During this period, the Philippines was facing significant economic challenges, including high inflation, a growing fiscal deficit, and the impact of major natural disasters such as the 1990 Luzon earthquake and the 1991 Mount Pinatubo eruption, which collectively killed more than 2,500 people.

In 2019, the Philippines government, under President Rodrigo Duterte and then-Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr, announced plans to reopen the Embassy in Rabat as part of a wider diplomatic expansion. Although delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Embassy was officially inaugurated on June 12, 2021—coinciding with the 123rd anniversary of Philippines independence.

A turning point in bilateral ties

Baja said that the reopening was a turning point in rekindling ties with Morocco. He described the presentation of his credentials to King Mohammed VI as a highlight of his diplomatic career and expressed hope that 2025 would bring further high-level exchanges and new bilateral agreements.

Describing relations with Morocco as “very good,” Baja reflected on the steady progress made across multiple sectors. He spoke especially of the momentum witnessed in the last seven to eight years, stressing that trade has increased significantly between the two countries.

In 2023, Morocco’s exports to the Philippines totaled approximately \$13.55 million, while the Philippines exported goods worth about \$37.03 million to Morocco. Key Moroccan exports include salt, sulphur, earth, and cement, which accounted for \$10.87 million, followed by pharmaceuticals, fish, plastics, and furniture.

On the other hand, the Philippines primarily exports electrical machinery, motor vehicles and parts, fertilizers, apparel, and inorganic chemicals to Morocco. The positive trade balance for the Philippines reflects a strong export relationship, with growing opportunities for Moroccan businesses in the Philippines market.

Among the key milestones Ambassador Baja recalled was the 2022 meeting of the former Philippines Foreign Secretary, Teodoro Locsin with his Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita. The two ministers notably signed an air services agreement, pledging to bridge the geographical gap between their countries and promote tourism.

“These agreements cover political and economic areas and support growing people-to-people exchanges,” said Ambassador Baja, noting the rising number of Filipinos working in Morocco and Moroccans visiting the Philippines.

In particular, Baja highlighted the countries’ policy of support for the promotion and the protection of their migrant nationals. “Just like the Philippines, Morocco also has a diaspora of Moroccans all over the world,” he explained. “The Philippines has more than 10 million Filipinos all over the world, here in Morocco we have about 4,300, and I think our two countries have this common and very similar policy to protect our nationals wherever they are.”

With a visa-free system already in place for both Filipino and Moroccan citizens, the agreement is expected to encourage even greater mobility. “We see the Philippines becoming a strong destination for Moroccan students, especially with the growing interest in learning English,” he noted.

Cut from the same cloth

“One really feels welcomed here in Morocco,” said the ambassador, noting the cultural and social affinities between Filipinos and Moroccans, who share the same warm, hospitable, and welcoming spirit.

A poignant symbol of the shared sensibilities between the two peoples manifested during this year’s celebrations, when the Philippines Embassy hosted a textile and fabric exhibition at the Aba Ababou Gallery in Rabat this past February. The exhibit showcased beautiful traditional Filipino textiles, some of which were embroidered by Moroccan artisans—an artistic gesture symbolizing the fusion and friendship between the two cultures.

As in Morocco, textiles are an integral part of Filipino culture. With a weaving tradition that dates back to the 13th century, Filipino textile art is marked by a rich variety of materials—from abaca and native cotton to pineapple fibers. The techniques and symbolism embedded in the designs reflect deep-rooted beliefs passed down through generations, despite the pressures of globalization and industrialization.

Leading up to the celebration, the embassy held a logo design competition to mark 50 years of diplomatic relations between Morocco and the Philippines. The contest welcomed entries from both Moroccan and Filipino participants, inviting them to creatively express the spirit of this enduring partnership.

The winning design came from John Atedio Bermejo, whose emblem powerfully represents the national animals of both countries—the Barbary lion of Morocco and the Haribon eagle of the Philippines. In the logo, the two majestic creatures face the same direction, symbolizing unity and shared vision. And the two are framed by shapes in the vibrant colors of the Moroccan and Filipino flags, forming the number “50.”

“While the eagle is known as the ruler of the skies and the lion as the king of the earth, the two creatures are symbols of strength, courage, and power,” reads the banner featuring this year’s emblem.

Looking to the future, Baja expressed confidence that the next 50 years will build on the achievements of the past half-century. “We hope to further strengthen economic ties and deepen both bilateral and multilateral cooperation,” he said.

The Embassy also plans to release a commemorative book chronicling the 50 years of diplomatic relations. And Ambassador Baja hopes that the book “will become a good reference material for the next generation to study and really think about what to do for the next 50 years.”

As the golden jubilee celebrations continued, Ambassador Baja concluded on a proud note: “Being here in Morocco to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations is a very proud moment for all of us here in the embassy and I am sure for our counterparts also in Manila.”

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