

The Politics of Tourism in Myanmar

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The relationship between politics and tourism is complex and multi-faceted, and a subject which is assuming a higher priority in the research literature. This article examines the politics of tourism in Myanmar where tourism has been shaped by internal and external political forces while also becoming a highly visible and contested political issue. The political background and its effect on Myanmar's tourism are explained and the standpoints of the principal groups involved are discussed, with particular attention given to that of the government and its policies. Reference is also made to demands for a boycott and the ensuing debate about its value. The various parties are seen to interpret and make use of tourism as a political tool in contrasting ways which reflect their own interests and agendas. Finally, some general conclusions are presented about the linkages connecting the central concepts under review and the need to consider tourism within the framework of prevailing national and international political systems in order to fully appreciate its significance.

Keywords

Myanmar, politics, tourism

Introduction

This article explores aspects of the inter-connectedness of politics and tourism, based on the case of Myanmar where tourism acquired a heightened political significance in the closing decades of the 20th century. Myanmar is a particularly appropriate laboratory in which to study the politicisation of tourism because of the nature of the regime and the range in forms of political appropriation of its tourism, discussion of which affords wider insights into the dynamics of the linkages between the two concepts under review in theory and practice. A reassessment of the politics of tourism in Myanmar is also timely given signs of a shift in the political landscape and news of talks between the military rulers and opposition which have implications for its future prospects as a destination.

The aim is to illuminate the political processes underpinning and central to tourism, showing how political ideologies and events affect tourist arrivals and the tourism industry and how tourism may function as an instrument of reform. After an opening summary of the literature pertaining to the relationship between politics and tourism, an account is provided of conditions in Myanmar generally and in terms of its tourism in order to set the scene. The positions of the various parties involved are then assessed with emphasis on the military regime and its policies which demonstrate the appeal of tourism to those holding political power, even formerly xenophobic military dictatorships. Myanmar's junta is shown to have chosen to develop tourism in pursuit of a political agenda incorporating economic and hegemonic goals, a decision strongly challenged by adversaries at home and overseas. These have invested tourism with different

political meanings and purposes, some seeking to secure their own aims of democratisation by calling for a tourism ban. Such demands have been resisted by certain sections of the travel industry and more friendly nations which contend that tourism is a mechanism for positive change. The article ends with a discussion of the effectiveness of the attempted boycott.

The task of researching conditions in Myanmar is hindered by the unreliability of official statistics, especially relating to economic matters (The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2002a) and tourist arrivals (Bailey, 1998). International agencies have produced a series of reports which contain empirical data, although there is some variation with regard to controversial topics such as numbers affected by forced labour and relocation. Parts of the country are also still out of bounds for the visitor, notably near disputed border areas. The study is derived from analysis of the information available, including that produced by the regime in Myanmar itself, and observations made during a visit to the country. While acknowledging the limitations of the material, it does allow a picture to be presented of the politics of tourism in Myanmar and makes it possible to draw some wider conclusions about the manner in which tourism can be politicised both inside and outside institutions of government. Overall, the findings illustrate the ways in which politics impacts on tourism and how tourism itself can become a critical political issue with global dimensions. Tourism is, therefore, best understood within a framework of politics and international relations, although practitioners may choose to ignore or distort political realities in accordance with their own commercial priorities.

Tourism and Politics

Tourism is, without doubt, a highly political phenomenon which extends beyond the sphere of formal government structures and processes if politics is conceived as being essentially about power relations, and it is thus an underlying and indirect theme in much tourism research. Although Brown (1998) agrees with earlier criticisms about neglect of the topic within both tourism and political science disciplines (Matthews, 1975; Richter, 1983), there has been an increasing number of studies devoted specifically to it (Hall, 1994) and Cheong and Miller (2000) argue that the politics of tourism is now a distinct academic subfield. One principal strand is public policy and planning (Elliott, 1997; Murphy, 1985; Reed, 1997) and Jenkins (2001) describes a growing interest in this question since his earlier introductory text (Hall & Jenkins, 1995). Political economy and development is a second major topic (Britton, 1982; de Kadt, 1979; Jenkins & Henry, 1982; Lea, 1988) and Third World tourism has generated a substantial volume of work which has evolved in line with development theories (Broham, 1996).

Another critical area of exploration, of heightened relevance since the events of 11 September 2001 in the USA, is that of political instability and its consequences for tourism (Pizam & Mansfield, 1996; Richter, 1992, 1999; Richter & Waugh, 1986; Seddighi *et al.*, 2000; Sonmez, 1998); examination of the American terrorist attacks is already underway (WTO, 2002). Related to this discussion is the debate about tourism's contribution to world peace and improved international understanding (Brown, 1989; D'Amore, 1994; Litvin, 1998). However, despite the expanding literature, the interaction between politics and tourism in

its multiple forms still appears under-researched in comparison to other dimensions with scope for further scrutiny in pursuit of a better understanding.

Research completed to date reveals that contrasts in political ideologies, cultures and practices help to determine the prominence given to tourism in planning, resource allocation and decision-making. Most governments, whether in the West or East, support tourism primarily because of its economic rewards (Go & Jenkins, 1997; Williams & Shaw, 1998) and countries which once avoided contact with the outside world have embraced the industry; for these, the promise of financial returns is seen to offset the risks of exposure to potentially subversive influences (Sofield & Li, 1998). Tourism has become an accepted, albeit contested, economic development tool that also allows governments to demonstrate their legitimacy and authority (Hall & Page, 2000; Richter, 1994). It may be employed in nation-building, tourist representations helping to define national and cultural identities and to meet other sociocultural objectives (Carter, 1996; Peleggi, 1996). Many political uses are made of tourism, some of which might be more accurately termed abuse when it is harnessed to hegemonic imperatives.

Tourism is thus exposed to and shaped by political forces and its dependence on security and stability has been well documented. Actual conditions and perceptions of these inform travel decisions made by consumers, as well as the industry and investors, who generally look for settled locations where there is little threat to personal safety and minimal commercial risk (EIU, 1994) These are not necessarily found in liberal democracies and authoritarian governments can 'provide extremely stable political environments in which tourism may flourish' (Hall & Oehlers, 2000: 79), although this is less likely in violent totalitarian states (Hall & Ringer, 2000). Tourism's capacity to stimulate political change in these extreme circumstances is unproven and there is little evidence of it acting as a peacemaker in general, although peace must usually exist for it to prosper.

South East Asia affords many interesting illustrations of the connections between politics and tourism (Richter, 1989), the latter often 'elite driven ... chosen by the powerful for political and economic advantage on both personal and regime levels' (Richter, 1993: 193) with vigorous promotion. Success has been mixed, however, and the Indochinese countries have been relatively slow to develop partly because of a turbulent recent past; their performance compares strikingly with the advances of the more stable Thailand and Singapore. Differences in political systems have also created distinct policy environments and contrasting patterns of tourism development, but tourism is frequently cited by officials as a means of improving international understanding of a country and its peoples. It is not only a vision of world harmony which inspires the latter statements but also an awareness of tourism as a channel to disseminate formally sanctioned images and identities which cast a flattering light on those in authority and earn much needed revenue. Such motivations are apparent in the case of Myanmar which is actively encouraging its tourism after a period of isolation resulting from the dictates of political ideologies and structures.

Changing Political Conditions in Myanmar

Myanmar's history dates back over 5000 years but perhaps modern Burma has its origins in the 19th century; this was a period of immense change and paved

the way for colonial occupation, Burma being annexed by the British in 1886 following three Anglo-Burmese wars (Thant, 2001). Cady (1958) outlines the revival of Burmese nationalism and the movement towards independence from the British in 1948 after 62 years of colonisation. An elected government held power, interrupted by two years of military rule, until 1962 when there was a coup and the armed forces have exercised control ever since. The regime pursued a policy of deliberate isolation and sought to create a centralised economy founded on principles enshrined in the 1965 Law of Establishment of the Socialist Economic System, with widespread nationalisation of industries. This philosophy was entitled the Burmese Way to Socialism but led to an economic crisis (Maung, 1991) and mounting unpopularity at home, culminating in an uprising in 1988 which was quelled with great severity and left many fatalities (Smith, 1999). The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was installed as the next military government and it attempted to introduce a more market-oriented system, organising elections in 1990 when the National League for Democracy (NLD) won over 80% of the vote. The party, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, has not been permitted to take office and this has provoked domestic discontent and strong condemnation overseas.

Colonial place names were abandoned after the upheavals of 1988 and Burma and its capital of Rangoon became Myanmar and Yangon respectively. Several commentators continue to refer to Burma, considering the government responsible for the new names to be illegitimate, while the tourism industry in generating markets has invested names from the colonial era with a commercial value which it exploits in its marketing. Myanmar is employed in this study due to its current usage, but this does not signify an opinion about its acceptability. In another name change, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replaced the SLORC in 1997, yet many key figures remain in office.

The authorities have suppressed the opposition by severely restricting its activities, keeping supporters under regular surveillance and imprisoning many dissidents (Amnesty International, 2000) with Aung San Suu Kyi experiencing persistent intimidation and harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Dialogue between the government and NLD was, however, officially acknowledged as taking place in 2000 and a number of political detainees were released and the opposition's local offices reopened the following year. Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from her most recent period of house arrest in May 2002 amid further talks about the possibilities of constitutional amendments. Nevertheless, progress has been slow (*New York Times*, 2002) and there is scepticism in some quarters about official motives. These are seen as the outcome of a 'growing realisation by some members of the SPDC that further compromise with the NLD is the key to unlocking vital international aid and investment', Aung San Suu Kyi being termed the 'gatekeeper' of such funds (EIU, 2002a: 7). Major concessions are unlikely in the immediate future and the SPDC seems set to retain power, despite signs of factionalism amongst the ruling elite.

As well as the denial of freedom of political association and expression, other unacceptable practices have been documented over a number of years such as forced labour and relocation (Amnesty International, 2002a; International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2000; United Nations Special Rapporteur, 1995; US

Department of Labor, 2000). A UN resolution in 2001, adopted by the General Assembly, 'expressed concern about the high level of human rights violations' in Myanmar (Amnesty International, 2002a: 2). Amnesty International reported in July 2002 that SPDC troops were resorting to forced labour, torture, extortion, eviction and land confiscation in ethnic areas in order to undermine local support for rebel armies (Amnesty International, 2002b). An ILO investigation in June 2002 also found that labour was still being coerced, especially near military camps (EIU, 2002a).

These measures have been directed particularly against the country's ethnic minorities whose traditional territories constitute about one-half of the country. The minorities comprise over 100 subgroups of different religious allegiances, marginalised by the dominant BaMa or Burmese who make up 65% of Myanmar's 50 million population (Matthews, 2001). The army has struggled to contain minority unrest in border areas and the spectre of fragmentation provides a justification for the maintenance of a strong military presence. Although ceasefires have been negotiated with several secessionist groups, ethnic discontent is ongoing and a cause of tension between Myanmar and Thailand and other immediate neighbours. Nevertheless, there have been some advances regarding human rights on the whole and the 2001 UN resolution did recognise and welcome improvements while the SPDC is cooperating with the ILO which has established a Liaison Officer in Yangon.

Observers accept the country's immense economic potential, but also the problems to be resolved. The moves towards a market economy were formalised in 1989 when the 1965 Law was repealed with the intention of liberalising the economy through encouraging foreign investment, expanding the private sector and lifting regulations. The Foreign Investment Law was central to this policy and designed to increase exports, support capital investment, promote high technology, provide employment, exploit natural resources, save energy and stimulate regional development. Restrictions were removed on private participation in domestic and foreign trade and financial incentives provided for investors including tax exemptions and relief, approval for repatriation of profits, guarantees against nationalisation for overseas investors and streamlined licensing procedures. Investors have the choice of setting up 100% wholly owned enterprises or entering into part ownership or joint ventures with a public or private agency; in the latter two cases, foreign capital must represent a minimum of 35% of the total equity (Union of Myanmar, 2002a). According to the World Bank (1995), partnership with state enterprises is preferred because of its advantages in facilitating access to infrastructure and public services.

The approach met with some success and there was a period of improved GDP growth rates and rising Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows (Than & Thein, 2000). However, it failed to halt economic decline and Myanmar is now one of the world's poorest countries where the population is seriously disadvantaged (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2001). The EIU (2002a) identifies the numerous economic difficulties as rising inflation, falling foreign investment, balance of payment weaknesses and a large untaxed informal economy compounded by government reluctance to undertake fundamental reforms. Levels of savings and domestic investment are inadequate and the official exchange rate extremely overvalued (Than & Thein, 2000). These are obsta-

cles to trade and international investors face 'erratic regulatory implementation, infrastructural frustrations and other operational nightmares' (EIU, 2002b).

Myanmar's political history has adversely affected its relations with parts of the international community and the actions of its leaders are frequently criticised, the junta having acquired an unenviable reputation and regarded with opprobrium by many (Houtman, 1999; Steinberg, 1998). An additional complaint is the extent of drug trafficking, possibly with official collusion, and the amount of opium and methamphetamines produced in the country (Takano, 2002). The European Union (EU) formulated a Common Position on Burma in 1996 consisting of an arms embargo, visa restrictions and bans on defence links, senior bilateral government visits and non-humanitarian aid. This was strengthened in 2000 and GSP trading privileges were suspended in 1997, the Common Position extended for another six months in April 2002. The EU has co-sponsored UN resolutions condemning human rights violations, most recently in April 2002. Individual European countries have taken other steps and the UK, for example, 'discourages trade, investment and tourism with/in Burma' (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2002: 3). The USA has also undertaken action with a Presidential Order in 1997 prohibiting 'new investment in Burma by US persons, and their facilitation of new investment in Burma by foreign persons'. There are some general exemptions and spending on humanitarian projects is permissible (US Department of the Treasury, 2002).

European and American demands have been an added impediment to economic development and the country has been shunned by several international aid donors and investors in the West and elsewhere (EIU, 2001a,b), its major trading partners being South Asian countries, China and Japan. Nevertheless, official statistics list the UK, USA, France and The Netherlands amongst the top ten investors in the period up until the beginning of 2001. By then, 25 countries had committed US\$7357.27 million in 350 projects across 11 sectors, the table of foreign investors headed by Singapore (Union of Myanmar, 2002a).

The military regime has complained of its portrayal abroad and the depiction in the international media of the armed forces as a 'ruthless trigger-happy bunch of thugs shooting and killing civilians and repressing democratic activities'. Officials counter that 'Myanmar has undeniably managed to transform itself into one of the most peaceful and stable nations in the world today' (Union of Myanmar, 2002b) and its admission into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 might be interpreted as a step towards acceptance and a measure of stability. Despite opposition (Bachoe & Stohard, 1997), ASEAN advocates a programme of constructive engagement and Malaysia has played a part in talks between the government and NLD. Australia too argues that the 'best way to resolve Burma's problems in the long term is through sustained and constructive dialogue among relevant domestic players' (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Travel, 2002: 1). However, the government's standing is still low and it has acquired pariah status in many quarters.

As well as a reviled political system and economy in dire straits, 'there is a mounting array of new social problems that underpin the country's collapse to one of ten poorest . . . But, with the universities repeatedly closed, the question remains where the next generation of qualified leaders and personnel will emerge from' (Smith, 1999: 452). The future is a matter of speculation and the

place of Burma in the modern world of widespread globalisation, economic restructuring, dynamic and complex financial and commodity markets and multinational corporations is unclear. There are some signs of more positive economic trends (EIU, 2002a) and the opening up of the country after rejection of the socialist-style planned economy has encouraged a degree of accommodation with the rest of the world. Tourism has both benefited from and assisted in this process. Aung San Suu Kyi's attitude is of relevance in determining any alteration in international relations and her release has already met with a favourable, albeit qualified, response from critics overseas. Once opposed to all aid, investment and tourism until the restoration of democracy, commentators suggest that she might be modifying this stance (EIU, 2002c). The prospects for the country's tourism are thus inextricably linked to political developments which have also shaped it to date in the manner now discussed.

Tourism in Myanmar and the Impact of Politics

Myanmar possesses many outstanding tourist attractions related to natural scenery, culture and history. The ethnic groups are of special interest alongside its religious architecture; for example, the former capital of Bagan has over 2000 temples, stupas and pagodas. The slow progress of modernisation is also deemed a selling point in travel literature, the country presented as a place in which to experience Asia as it once was. Tourism is concentrated in Yangon, Bagan, Mandalay and Taung-gyi near Inle Lake which were identified by the government as major tourist centres in the mid-1990s. These can be found on the map in Figure 1 which also shows the Ayeyarwaddy (Irrawady) river, a cruising venue. In spite of the wealth of tourism resources, the country's potential as a destination has yet to be realised. Its relatively poor showing compares with that of nearby countries such as Thailand and Vietnam which attracted 8.6 million and 1.8 million respectively in 1998; even Laos recorded 270,000 visitors that year (WTO, 2000). Myanmar's weak performance is largely attributable to political circumstances, but there has also been some expansion as a result of a policy to promote tourism which itself is the consequence of political and economic change.

Although official figures must be treated with caution, they do provide a guide to the scale of activity and those contained in Table 1 indicate an irregular pattern of visitor arrivals. There was erratic growth in the 1970s and 1980s from very modest beginnings, followed by a dramatic fall after the 1988 disturbances. Recovery occurred in the 1990s, boosted by government initiatives outlined in the next section, and Aung Sang Suu Kyi's release from a six-year period of house arrest. Visit Myanmar Year in 1996 did see a substantial rise over the previous year, whilst failing to reach its target of 500,000 visitors, with limited growth thereafter. Tourism then entered a slump at the end of the 20th century, partly due to the economic recession in major regional markets. Asia accounted for over 60% of visitors in 1999, dominated by Taiwan and Japan, and Western Europe contributed 26% of arrivals (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2002). Asian travel is mainly business related and that from Europe is leisure oriented (Bailey, 1998).

The recent fortunes of Myanmar's tourism are therefore tied to various manifestations of its politics with tourism responding to particular incidents and

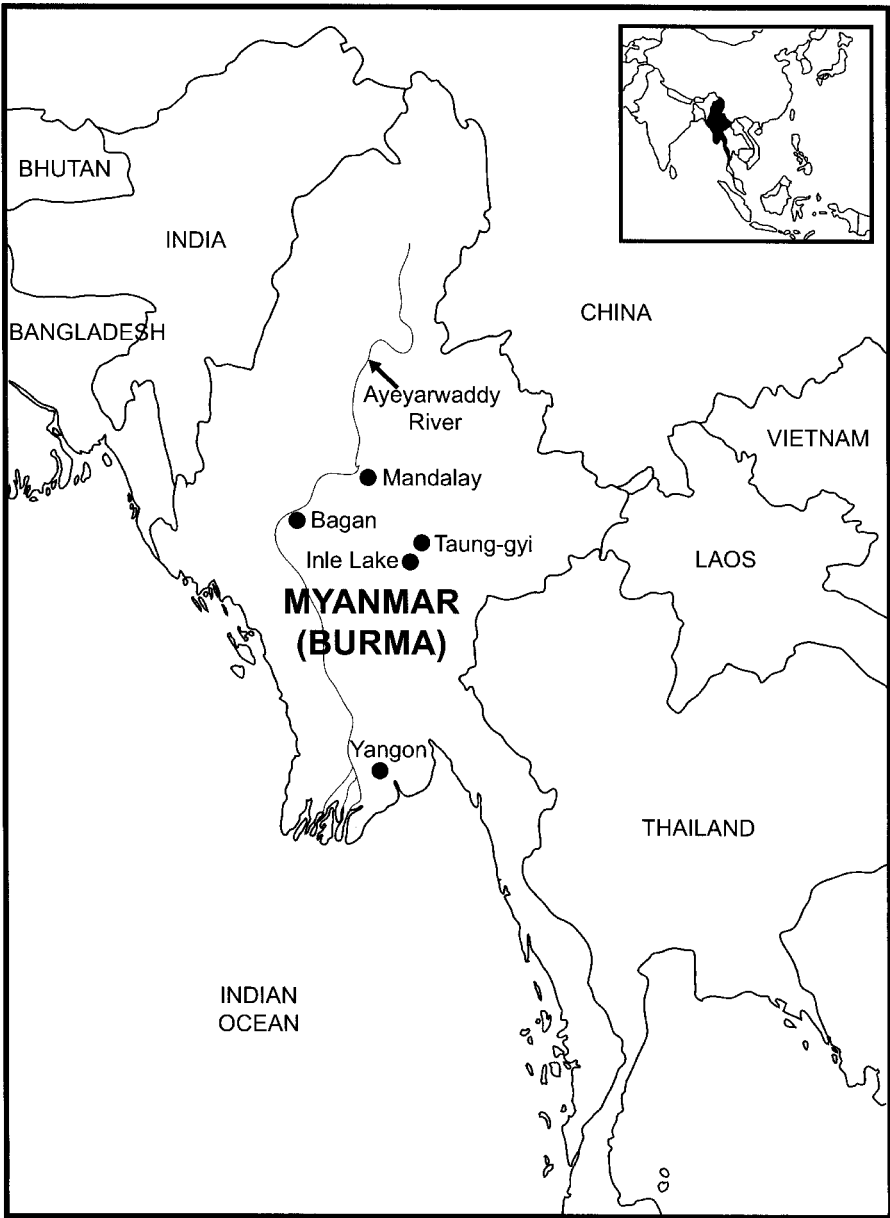


Figure 1 Myanmar and principal tourist centres

policy decisions, but one notable feature is the low volumes recorded overall. The fundamental instability of the military regime has been a deterrent to travel and unattractive images of its leaders, associations of political repression and arguments that tourism is partly responsible for human rights abuses represent strong disincentives in certain markets. With regard to the latter, it is alleged that

Table 1 International arrivals into Myanmar

<i>Year</i>	<i>Arrivals</i>	<i>% Annual change</i>
1974/75	11052	–
1975/76	15710	42
1976/77	18933	21
1977/78	22715	20
1978/79	21158	7
1979/80	22930	8
1980/81	27278	19
1981/82	28110	3
1982/83	30741	9
1983/84	28998	–6
1984/85	30779	6
1985/86	35948	17
1986/87	41645	16
1987/88	41418	–1
1988/89	9963	–76
1992/93	26000	–
1993/94	61000	135
1994/95	100000	64
1995/96	120205	20
1996/97	251501	109
1997/98	265122	5
1998/99	287394	8
1999/2000	246007	–14
2000/01	208676	–15.2

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2001b, 2002d), Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, Union of Myanmar (2002).

labour has been forcibly exacted from as many as a million people including children, pregnant women and the elderly who have been commandeered for infrastructure works. Specific numbers are not available for hotel and tourist projects but there are suspicions that the authorities coerced labour to restore heritage sites such as Mandalay Palace in preparation for Visit Myanmar Year, as well as on railway upgrading and airport runway schemes (Parnwell, 1998).

Redevelopment has required resettling an estimated 1–4 million citizens (Maung, 1998; Smith, 1994). Large-scale displacement of urban residents to new satellite towns started in the early 1990s with a City Beautification and Development Programme intended to ‘face-lift major cities to attract foreign investors and tourists’ (Maung, 1998: 151). Pilger (2000) quotes a 1995 International Federation of Trade Unions report that 1 million people were evicted from their homes in the capital to make way for tourism and other types of development, although Philp and Mercer (1999) put the figure at 200,000. In Bagan, 5000 people living among the ancient pagodas were moved to a location without accommodation 7 km away in 1990 and given 250 kyats (US\$2.50) compensation. There are also

accusations that members of the military elite have a financial stake in major tourism enterprises and stand to gain personally from the industry (Hall & Oehlers, 2000; Parnwell, 1998).

Such news stories have generated adverse publicity and public awareness in America, Australia and Europe leading to attempts to impose a tourism boycott (Thinking of Going to Burma? Don't!, 2001) which are examined later. Calls for a ban combined with other obstacles, many of which can be traced to political policy and ideology linked to economics, have harmed tourism. Weaknesses persist of poor infrastructure and communications, skilled manpower shortages, lack of marketing and promotion expertise, restrictive visa and foreign exchange rules, bureaucratic red tape, inadequate heritage conservation and inferior quality souvenirs (United Nations, 1995). There are also complaints about the excessive costs of visitor accommodation and the absence of tourist freedom of movement.

The state of the tourism industry has thus been determined by Myanmar's politics and proved vulnerable to its tensions and insecurities. The removal of the formidable barriers to tourism will only be achieved in the longer term within the context of a new political direction. Yet the relationship between politics and tourism is not a straightforward one whereby tourism is merely impacted by political events. As suggested by the exceptional demands for a boycott, tourism itself has entered the arena of politics to become a highly charged political issue for many of those involved, interpreted and employed in distinct ways by governments, non-governmental agencies and tourism businesses. The different conceptions and applications of tourism as a political tool are now evaluated, beginning with an account of government attitudes and decision-making. The omission of two key groups must, however, be acknowledged; these are the local population who unfortunately do not have a voice and the tourists themselves who have still to be surveyed.

The Government of Myanmar

The isolation originally desired by the military government extended to international tourism and only a small number of strictly regulated short visits were permitted due to 'overconcern and apprehension of foreign influence' (Naing Bwa, 1995: 1). Tourism was gradually reintroduced in the 1980s (Hall, 1997) and development plans were announced in 1985 (Ministry of Trade, Hotels and Tourism, 1985). The 1988 protests marked a turning point and the SLORC's previous xenophobia was modified in revised strategies emerging from a realignment in economic planning generally. Tourism was accepted as an industry of potential importance and a major foreign exchange generator. Earnings were to be 'utilised in the development of other important sectors of economy such as education, agriculture etc, but also bring about the prosperity of all those people who are employed in tourism' (Kyaw Ba, 1995: 3). Tourism has since been promoted by the SLORC and SPDC as a route to national economic advancement with a focus on 'up-market tourists' and establishing a 'reputation for high quality cultural tourism' (Tin Aye, 1995: 4).

The shift in approach is symbolised by the 1990 Tourism Law which recognised tourism as a significant economic activity and ended the state monopoly, allowing local and foreign private operators to run hotels, transport businesses

and tour guiding services. The industry had gained from the 1988 Foreign Investment Law with investment switching to hotels and tourism from oil, gas and mining by the mid-1990s (Than & Thein, 2000). A second Hotel and Tourism Law in 1993 affirmed official support, setting out objectives related to the growth of the hotel and tourism sector. Myanmar's cultural heritage and scenic beauty were to be exploited, maximising employment opportunities, while fostering 'international friendship and understanding' (United Nations, 1995: 65).

As the 1990s progressed, tourism became 'high on the list of Burma's development priorities' (Hall, 1997: 168) and this was evidenced by the declaration of 1996 as Visit Myanmar Year with its ambitious goal of half a million visitors. The promotion was accompanied by measures such as the simplification of visa procedures, guide training, increased internal and external access, hosting of festivals and enhancement and additions to attractions such as the new National Museum (Hall, 1997; Philp & Mercer, 1999). The occasion was perceived as a crucial stage in both tourism marketing and international relations, appropriate because 'after the political upheaval of 1988, which we had the misfortune of creating bad image of the country, we now have stability in politics, unity among the indigenous races, the clean and green cities and towns' (Naing Bwa, 1995: 17). Previous arrival figures had been disappointing 'due to some foreign media exaggerating about the insurgency and distorted news of the actual situation in the country' (Tin Aye, 1995: 3). Disseminating a favourable picture to the rest of the world of 'the true image of Myanmar, the bright and untarnished image . . . her unblemished, true perspective' (*New Light of Myanmar*, 2001) is thus made possible through tourism.

There was a period of rapid hotel construction and the number of properties rose from 18 in 1988 to 43 in 1993, with a total of 450 by 1997. Despite a 'liberal' investment climate in the hotel sector for foreigners (Bailey, 1998: 62), Western companies were not heavily represented (Perry Hobson & Leung, 1997). Even among Asian lenders and investors, there was a 'strong aversion to countries like Myanmar' due to perceptions of 'political risk and lack of investment security' (Mattila, 1997: 6). Almost half of the funding came from Singapore, other principal sources being Thailand and Japan, with large amounts allocated to hotels of a modern international standard which had previously been lacking (Bailey, 1998). Build-operate-transfer arrangements were available to foreign investors with an initial lease period of 30 years and renewable thereafter for a further 15 years, the investor paying a land use premium and annual rent dependent on hotel revenue (United Nations, 1995). There were 498 hotels in the hands of private entrepreneurs by 2001, 18 privately rented from the state and eight operated by the state; these were located mainly in Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan (Union of Myanmar, 2002a).

In addition to enlarging the stock of hotel accommodation, efforts have been made to raise the quality and supply of other facilities. A 1995 masterplan emphasised the appeal of natural attractions and recommended diversification into new areas such as skiing and trekking (United Nations, 1995). The popularity of historic sites was noted, but also the urgent need for heritage conservation. Ecotourism began to be promoted (Lwin, 1999) and Nature Reserves were designated with the assistance of international environmental organisations (Philp &

Mercer, 1999). Golf courses have been built and ethnic groups given prominence in advertising (*Today*, 2002).

Improving infrastructure was acknowledged as another critical goal and air and surface transport services have seen some investment and improvement. There were 66 airports in 2001, compared to 43 in 1988, several of international status. The new Mandalay International Airport opened in 2000 and further airports and runway extensions at Yangon International Airport are planned (Union of Myanmar, 2002a). Myanmar Airways International (MAI), serving all international air routes, was formed in 1993 as a joint venture with Singapore and Brunei partners. It is an example of how limits on foreign participation in the specific industries listed in the State-Owned Economic Enterprise Act can be overcome with the approval of the relevant Ministry. The authorities took over the running of MAI from 1998 to 2001, but Region Air now has a 49% share in the company (MAI, 2002). Road communications have also been upgraded and the very limited motorway system extended.

Inbound tour businesses and outbound travel agencies were also affected by economic reforms with evidence of greater foreign participation; of the 508 tour operators in the country in 1999, 12 were joint ventures and one foreign owned (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2002). Orient-Express Hotels Ltd, which also manages the Orient Express and Eastern & Oriental rail services, began luxury cruises in 1995 and this was hailed as an expression of confidence in Myanmar's tourism. Licenced tour guides numbered 4854 in 2001 when there were 444 licenced tour vehicles (Union of Myanmar, 2002a). Guiding and the tourism industry overall appear to be attractive to prospective employees, offering comparatively high salaries as well as other benefits.

The system of tourism administration has evolved over time and the creation of a separate Ministry of Hotels and Tourism in 1992 is indicative of the heightened priority attached to tourism. The 1993 Hotel and Tourism Law defines the Ministry's responsibilities as 'policy formulation, planning, marketing and facilitating of the private sector', aiming to 'bring about employment opportunities, to raise the living standard; and to earn a large amount of foreign exchange in a short period' (United Nations, 1995: 8). In addition to this economic orientation, the Ministry's interests cover tourism and heritage preservation and strengthening friendships (Union of Myanmar, 2002a). It supervises a Directorate of Hotels and Tourism, divided into Myanmar Hotels and Tourism Services and Restaurant and Beverage Enterprise. The former deals with government hotels, package tours, foreign independent travellers and retail outlets while the latter oversees motels and restaurants (United Nations, 1995). A Tourism Industry Development Management Committee was set up in 1994 with the object of further boosting international tourism in order to increase foreign exchange and raise awareness of the country.

No information was available about any later documented strategies but public announcements suggest that efforts are continuing to further develop tourism and secure investment. Promotion overseas remains limited, with a reliance on the private sector, although the Greater Mekong Subregion tourism initiative affords opportunities for joint marketing. It also permits access to the expertise of Thailand which is deemed the senior member of the alliance of coun-

tries through which the Mekong river flows (Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism, 2002; Tan, 2000).

The recent downturn in arrivals and fall in investment must, nevertheless, be a cause for concern. There was no FDI in hotels and tourism for the whole of 1998/99, only two projects were approved in 1999/2000 and investment approvals on the whole dropped by over 90% during the first 11 months of 2001/02 over the previous year. FDI in the hotel and tourism sector, which accounted for 12% of projects and 14% of funding in 2001 (Union of Myanmar, 2002a), also shrank from US\$15.5 to US\$5.3 million in the latter period (EIU, 2002e). Such a trend can be explained by the difficulties of the operating environment and the damaging repercussions of the Asian financial crisis and recession for potential investors within the region. The EIU (2002f) is perhaps overly pessimistic, however, when it writes of a 'crumbling industry' and 'desperate attempt to shore it up', including a chain of border casinos which 'serious investors and travellers are advised to stay clear of'.

The official statements and actions summarised here reveal that tourism is perceived as a source of revenue and employment, a way of communicating a favourable impression abroad of orderliness and peace and a means of legitimisation. It has also acquired a purpose in reinforcing a sense of national identity which is essentially that of the Burmese or dominant majority, with the army acting as protector of the nation's heritage and defender of its unity (Philp & Mercer, 1999). However, there have been reservations about the implications of an influx of tourists and the 1993 Hotel and Tourism Law highlights the need to prevent disturbance to both natural and cultural heritage. Learning from the experience of over-development in other countries and avoiding adverse impacts such as pollution and AIDS is also made reference to in the 1995 plan. The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism is entrusted with preventing the 'destruction and pollution of Myanmar cultural heritage' (Tin Aye, 1995: 2) and protecting natural resources. The Director of Intelligence, responsible for Visit Myanmar Year, also warned about certain 'tourist types' who 'might harm the dignity of the nation' (Maung, 1998: 164).

Not all restrictions have been lifted and visas, itineraries and activities are controlled. It is illegal to stay anywhere other than government or government-licensed hotels and the intelligence service monitors tourists (Philp & Mercer, 1999). The visitor is also exposed to the propaganda of the regime, the main tourism guide (*Today*, 2002: 1) opening with statements of the three main national causes (non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national sovereignty and consolidation of national sovereignty), the people's desire and the four economic and social objectives. There is praise for the armed forces in 'striving together with the people for emergence of a peaceful, modern and developed nation' and joining 'hands with the people in guarding against the internal and external dangers'.

The Opposition in Myanmar

In contrast to government conceptions and usages, tourism is a weapon with which the opposition can attack the authorities with and exert pressure for political reform. By seeking a travel ban, opposition parties are attempting to deny the

SPDC income and the aura of respectability accruing from acceptance as an international tourist destination. After the launch of Visit Myanmar Year, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) and others asked tourists to boycott Myanmar until democratic change was underway. The NLD maintained that 'it is too early for either tourists or investment or aid to come pouring into Burma. We would like to see that these things are conditional on genuine progress towards democratization'. Speaking for the party, Aung San Suu Kyi requested potential tourists to show that they would not 'buy their pleasure at the expense of the ordinary people' who had been the victims of forced labour and relocation to facilitate tourism (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997: 168).

The rationale underlying these pleas challenges the conventional argument about tourism as a vehicle for mutual understanding and peace through cultural exchange by demanding an end to any such contacts, although the objective is the removal of a regime founded on repression. Yet Aung San Suu Kyi has admitted that tourists cannot be expected to stay away forever. In answer to a question from the press about the positive attributes of tourism, she granted that 'tourists can open up the world to the people of Burma just as the people of Burma can open up the eyes of the tourists to the situation in their own country if they're interested in looking' (Free Burma, 2001). There have been unsubstantiated rumours about an absence of agreement within the opposition over the boycott and there may be a reappraisal given the easing of some political tensions.

Friendly and Hostile Governments Overseas

Certain states view tourism as a means to demonstrate friendship and consolidate ties with Myanmar. For example, Singapore enjoys good relations with the country and confrontation with a fellow ASEAN member would be awkward diplomatically for the Association. In addition, tourism is a mine of commercial opportunities and Singapore is a major investor in Myanmar's industry. A consortium of Singapore companies established SMILE (Singapore–Myanmar International Leisure Enterprises) as a focal point for cooperation in the mid-1990s when Myanmar was lauded by Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry as an 'excellent platform for investment' with 'enormous tourism potential' which 'should be shared with the rest of the world' (Yeo, 1995: 2).

Help has been provided by the Singapore Tourism Board which advocated the packaging of Buddhist thematic tours centred on the culture and architecture of Yangon and a US\$3 million Singapore Technical Assistance Fund has financed hotel management courses as part of a bilateral manpower training and technical exchange scheme (*Straits Times*, 1999). Singapore's pragmatism is reflected in the Senior Minister's observation that 'at the end of the day, the opposition in Burma has to face the realities of life. The one instrument of effective government there is the army' (Lee, 1996). Such views also colour press reporting and a travel feature on the capital in Singapore's principal newspaper discloses that 'politics is taboo in day-to-day social discourse in Myanmar . . . And the general consensus among Yangon residents is that their lot – at least economically – is better off, all thanks to the government . . . Indeed, a visitor feels strangely safe on the streets of Yangon' (*Straits Times*, 2002).

Tourism is a tool of diplomacy serving rather different ends for more hostile

nations like the UK whose official attitude is dictated by broader foreign policy considerations. While there might be cynicism about its commitment, the British government pronounces itself 'at the forefront of the movement to press the regime to abandon its repressive policies' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1999) as described earlier. With specific reference to tourism, the Minister of State has condemned the Myanmar authorities and drawn attention to 'the views of the pro-democracy leaders in Burma that it would be inappropriate for tourists to visit Burma at present' (*Hansard*, 1998). These sentiments are echoed in a letter to the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) urging the industry to heed the opinions of Aung San Suu Kyi and others that 'the economic benefits and political legitimacy derived from tourism hardens the government's resistance to change' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1998).

Other Agencies

The application of tourism as a lever to compel the regime to recognise the opposition and introduce political reform underlies the positions of various pressure groups and non-governmental organisations. Tourism is a focus for a number conducting more general campaigns and the staging of Visit Myanmar Year had a catalytic effect (Oo & Perez, 1996; Tourism Concern, 2002). Demands for a boycott intensified amongst human rights agencies in America, Australia and Europe alongside Burmese groups in exile and other organisations. Protestors aver that tourists 'should not go to Burma on holiday . . . whilst SLORC continues to deny basic human rights to its people' (Burma Action Group, 1996: 3).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) construe visitation as an expression of support for the government while deliberate non-participation in tourism is one of criticism which helps to sustain the opposition. They stress that tourism brings international recognition and fosters an illusion of peace and regularity while providing foreign exchange to pay for arms which strengthen the military. It thus fortifies the regime whose members may benefit personally and politically from any increase in arrivals. A tourism boycott means the denial of access to such rewards and erodes the foundations of the government, advancing desired political changes. Amnesty International does not advocate boycotts or disinvestment and leaves the decision up to the individual, but has asked everyone to write to Myanmar's generals to 'remind them that for all the bright refurbished face of Mandalay, the world has not forgotten the grim reality that lies behind' (Amnesty International, 1996: 7).

To Boycott or Not to Boycott?

A comprehensive review of the international tourism industry is beyond the scope of this study and tour operators in the UK, an important Western market, were selected to illustrate commercial responses to Myanmar's contentious politics. The original intention had been to conduct a survey of those UK tour operators selling the destination in their programmes and ABTA lists 22 operators as having 'specialist knowledge' of the country with additional members of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO) also active there. However, only three out of 28 returned the questionnaire while travel brochures were

provided by another two. The plan was therefore abandoned, but reference is made to the opinions of company representatives who did reply and the promotional material from this and other sources forms part of the analysis.

Operators have reacted to the situation and the dilemmas of doing business in Myanmar and marketing it in a variety of ways. Some have withdrawn due to doubtful security, poor sales and in sympathy with Aung San Suu Kyi's requests. A group continuing to sell the destination wrote to the SLORC in the mid-1990s voicing their worries about human rights reports and the implications of instability. Their anxieties seem as much commercial as ethical when stating that 'if a tour operator is going to publish an itinerary in their brochure they must have the confidence that they will be able to operate it without disruption' (Free Burma, 2001). There is a belief amongst companies consulted that the politics of a destination country is largely irrelevant, provided it does not impinge on the ability to conduct tours and tourist safety. Human rights abuses are not confined to Myanmar which does not deserve to be thus singled out. The management of a cruising company has implied elsewhere that any abuses are exaggerated and raises doubts as to whether they exist at all (Pilger, 2000).

Not surprisingly, this set of industry practitioners resists a travel boycott and talks of the right of tourists to visit and make up their own minds. The General Manager of the largest travel agency in Myanmar and Indochina has explained that curiosity about the Mekong region is 'so great that political issues are secondary. We believe that travellers from abroad should go there to see, and judge, for themselves. Only then would they be qualified to comment' (Matzig, 1997). Tourism can also break down barriers and accelerate economic progress which improves the everyday life of local people. Some companies refer to their sense of personal commitment to Burmese individuals with whom they have worked for many years.

Approaches to dealing with Myanmar's politics in the eight brochures examined range from ignoring the situation to making passing reference to the emergence of the country after a period of isolation in words which enhance its mystique. Others accept that the current regime has its critics but note there is 'nothing like seeing Burma at first hand, meeting the people and making your own evaluation of this extraordinarily beautiful country' (Noble Caledonia, 2001). One, describing itself as 'Britain's leading specialists for Burma', asserts that 'contact with the free world does more good than isolation' and a 'pro-active tourist policy for the country' is 'the moral choice' (Andrew Brock Travel, 2001). Nearly all feature colonial place names, perhaps an indication of their market value rather than the making of a political point.

Even the producers of guide books have been drawn into the controversy with the pressure group Tourism Concern attacking Lonely Planet for publishing a Myanmar edition (Birket, 2000). The guide devotes two pages to questions of politics in Myanmar, emphasising the complexities of the situation and suggesting that those who do choose to visit should target their spending at local enterprises, not state-sponsored tourism, and complain directly to the government about its human rights record. In defence of his decision, the publisher maintains that tourism aids many ordinary Burmese who are against the ban, and that forced labour is rarely attributable to tourism alone (Cumming, 1996a). The boycott is an 'empty gesture' and 'unfruitful tactic', with no evidence that repres-

sion will ease as a consequence (Cumming, 1996b). However, Myanmar is excluded from the Rough Guide series in anticipation that travellers will uphold the ban (Ridout & Reader, 2000).

The appropriateness of the boycott is unclear and its efficacy is equally debatable. The low figures do suggest that tourism is depressed but other determinants have been in operation to impede expansion rates. The influence of tourists, both those who visit and those who decide to stay away on ethical grounds, appears to be marginal compared to that of international and domestic political agencies and policies. The boycott may have affected arrivals from selected nations but some growth has taken place and perhaps 'the majority will simply read the brochures and listen to the travel companies: the policies and politics of particular destinations will only be of concern if they are seen as a threat to their personal interests' (Jeffries, 2001: 50). Discussion about the ethics of visiting Myanmar is also not one of relevance in all of Myanmar's source markets and tends to be conducted within the context of western preoccupations and sensibilities. For many of Myanmar's Asian visitors, such as the Taiwanese, the dispute about human rights seems less important than matters of personal safety, customs regulations and price (Lu, 2001). Some have proposed that the idealism of the boycotters needs to be mixed with realism and while democracy is the ultimate goal, it may be better to settle for 'incremental changes (pluralism, the building of civil society etc.) that would be less threatening, but in the long run accomplish more than the strident stance that may be as morally satisfying as it is ineffective' (Steinberg, 2000: 40).

Myanmar's tourism in the past, present and future cannot therefore be separated from domestic and international political circumstances. Analysis of the principal parties with an interest has shown the extent to which tourism there has been influenced by political thinking and practice at home and overseas. Its presence and growth has assumed a political relevance for these groups, interpreted and articulated in distinct ways. Even industry representatives who might prefer to be apolitical have been forced to participate in the political process by taking sides over the boycott.

Conclusion

Although possessing numerous strengths as a destination, the features and actions of Myanmar's government have hindered tourism and helped to prevent the country from realising its promise as a destination. Associations of a harsh military dictatorship and human rights abuses, combined with developmental impediments resulting from inept governance and relative isolation, have given rise to hostility and unfavourable images inimical to tourism. Until the underlying political tensions are resolved and new policies put in place leading to improvements both in realities and perceptions, Myanmar's tourism industry is unlikely to thrive. Possible differences in the sensitivities and performance of various markets must be noted, however, with major Asian generators apparently less sympathetic to questions of human rights while adversely affected by economic and political uncertainty.

This article has sought to demonstrate the fundamentally political nature of tourism which acts as an expression of political philosophy and instrument of

policy within and outside of government. In extreme cases, political insecurities and controversies commanding worldwide attention can disrupt and damage tourism, communicating messages which threaten the tourist's sense of psychological and physical comfort and imply difficulties for the industry. Tourism is also perceived to have some potency as a force for change by protagonists in political disputes but this is offset by the workings and interplay of much stronger political, economic and social phenomena and inequalities in the distribution of power and access to resources. While tourism depends upon conditions of peace and order, its ability to effect fundamental political restructuring to propel a state in this direction is severely constrained.

These conclusions have a resonance beyond Myanmar with the attacks of 11 September 2001 and their repercussions highlighting tourism's vulnerability to political events globally and locally. It becomes apparent that any country seeking to promote its tourism must recognise these considerations and appreciate that tourism functions as part of the wider economic and geopolitical system from which it cannot be divorced. Academics should also acknowledge the centrality of the relationship between politics and tourism and give due weight to it in their studies.

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