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Myanmar: Opening for Tourism

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Introduction

With a land area of 676,577 square kilometres, Myanmar is the second largest member country of ASEAN. Its borders extend from the snow-capped Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, and the Myeik Archipelago, which has been described as the largest undocumented archipelago in the world.

The country possesses a wealth of outstanding and diverse tourist attractions including cultural historical sites, spectacular natural scenery, and various ethnic minority groups such as Kukis (also known as Chin), Kachin, Mon and Shan. Bagan, the former capital, is an outstanding site for religious architecture, with over 2,000 temples, stupas and pagodas. Despite its considerable tourism resources, Myanmar has historically not been as successful in attracting tourists as other southeast Asian countries, in particular Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. Research reveals that this could be as a result of the negative image of the successive military governments that ruled the country from 1965 until the landmark democratic elections of 2012, and also many years of Western countries' active discouraging of their citizens from visiting Myanmar in protest over the government's heavyhanded rule and human rights abuses.



Figure 9.1: Map of Republic of the Union of Myanmar (official name). Source: Myanmar Consulate-General, Los Angeles USA

This chapter will address the recent development of tourism in Myanmar in parallel with the country's political development through military rule into the fledgling era of democracy. In this narrative, the mechanisms of tourism will be shown to have been used as instruments of oppression and exploitation by a repressive government, and also as tools of coercion and persuasion for positive change from actors both within and beyond the borders of the country.

Military rule in Myanmar

The territory of what is now the southeast Asian nation of Burma or Myanmar was conquered by Britain over the course of the three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1886). Britain incorporated Burma into its Indian Empire and administrated it as a province of India until 1937 when Burma became a self-governing colony. During the Second World War, Japan invaded and occupied Burma from 1942 to 1945. The Burmese nationalism movement emerged after the War (Hobbs, 1947). Negotiations for Burma's independence, led by General Aung San, achieved their goal in 1947. In the election that followed, Aung San's Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) won a definitive victory and Aung San became Deputy Chairman of the transitional government. However, on July 9 of that year, he and six of his colleagues were murdered by political adversaries. Aung San remains a widely revered figure to this day, not least because of the role that his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, would have, many years later, in reinstating democracy in the country.

Burma's formal independence from the Commonwealth took effect in 1948, under the elected government with U Nu serving as its first Prime Minister, weathering several insurgencies, until 1962, when he was ousted in a military coup led by General Ne Win, who then formed a single party state under the Socialist Programme Party. The junta also referred to itself as the Revolutionary Council. The Party led Burma into isolationism and adopted a centralized economy under a 'Burmese Way of Socialism' policy, which led to an economic crisis and increasing unpopularity of the military government. There have been sporadic protests against the government throughout the period of its rule. Growing resentment against the military rule was rooted in economic mismanagement, government corruption, police brutality, human-rights abuses and discrimination against ethnic minority groups, which led to an uprising on 8 August 1988 by the pro-democracy movement in Yangon, in which thousands of university students, monks, young children and housewives protested against the junta regime. The uprising rapidly spread throughout the country. After a bloody military coup by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the protest was brutally suppressed on 18 September 1988. Over 3,000 protesters were reportedly killed and thousands were injured.

The SLORC, under General Saw Maung, then formed another military government. In 1989, the SLORC changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and ended the socialist economy by reintroducing a market-oriented economy. Expecting to win by a landslide in the 1990 SLORC organized elections, the junta government was summarily defeated by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which won 82% of the parliamentary seats. Taken

aback by this unexpected outcome, the junta declared the election null and void and placed the leader of the NLD under house arrest from 1989 to 1995, 2000 to 2002, and then again from 2003 to 2010. Aung San Suu Kyi received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, during her first period of house arrest. She was finally released from house arrest in November 2010. The SLORC was nominally dissolved in 1997 and replaced by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which included most of the members of SLORC and continued its predecessor's absolute and repressive style of rule over the country.

Repression, sanctions and protests

After seizing power in 1989, the SLORC revoked the 1965 Law, instating a planned socialist economy, and replaced it with measures to reduce economic regulation, attract foreign investment, encourage private sector economic development, effectively moving the country towards a market economy (Henderson, 2003).

However, this move towards a more 'open' economic model was not accompanied by a freer society. In 1990 ongoing human rights abuses caused the United States to cut off diplomatic ties with Myanmar, impose economic sanctions and arms trade embargoes, and repeatedly advocate its exclusion from international financial organizations. While Western US allies followed suit in these policies, America's closest Asian trade partners, which tend also to have significant trade with Myanmar, have not (Hadar, 1998). For example, during this period Singapore advised the Myanmar government on the development of Buddhism-themed tours and provided US\$3 million in assistance for hospitality management education within a larger training and technology exchange agreement (Straits Times, 1999).

In 1996, the European Union arrived at a Common Position of sanctions on Myanmar, agreeing on an embargo on weapons and military cooperation, as well as restrictions on visas, state visits and non-humanitarian aid (though health, refugee and education-related aid has continued). The USA followed in 1997 with a decree forbidding investment in Myanmar. The UK decreed a broader policy to 'discourage trade, investment and tourism with/in Burma' (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2002:3).

In 2005, Condoleeza Rice, the US Secretary of State under President George W. Bush, declared Myanmar as an 'outpost of tyranny', in which the United States should intervene to bring freedom (BBC News, 2005). In 2007, a major protest against the Myanmar government was led by monks and pro-democracy activists. This protest is also known as the 'Saffron Revolution' (after the color of the robes worn by Buddhist monks). The junta brutally crushed the protestors, arresting 3,000 people and killing at least 31, with another 16 dying in government custody (Oxford Burma Alliance, n.d.).