

# Boycotting Burma in 2007 – Has the Debate Changed in any Way?

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Burma, a land of golden pagodas, ancient capitals, traditional arts and crafts, vast topographical diversity and a warm friendly people, offers a richly rewarding travel experience. Today the country is opening up rapidly, giving the visitor access to more of its wonders than ever before. Burma, however, also has a repressive military regime accused of serious human rights abuses, and a detained opposition leader who has repeatedly urged people not to visit. Therefore travel to Burma has been rather contested, and has been the subject of a long-running disagreement: is it ethical for tourists to visit Burma?

For poor, isolated and repressive regimes, foreign tourists - preferably those high spenders on a controlled route - represent an excellent opportunity to gain much-needed foreign exchange in large amounts in a short period of time, on top of increased investment and infrastructure development. On a more subtle level it is argued that the tourists coming to the country may also give legitimacy to the military rule. The visitors deciding to go to Burma may or may not consider the ramifications of supporting a military regime, which is ruling Burma illegitimately since 1988.

Yet the question arises in what way could a tourist exert any influence, by travelling there or not? The ethics of going to Burma are more complex than they seem on the surface: tourist numbers have increased significantly over the years, at least according to its government (Myanmar Ministry for Hotels and Tourism, 2007). This is despite the fact that prominent figures such as Tony Blair, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi and many more are telling the world to stay away and boycott Burma as a tourist destination. This article examines the complexities of the Burma travel boycott debate, whilst providing potential future tourism scenarios post 'Saffron-monk-uprising' of late 2007.

## 'Burma' or 'Myanmar'?

It is necessary to elaborate on the name use for many reasons. The recent military crack down on pro-democracy protests by the monks in the country showed the 'war of words', which has started again over what to call the nation (e.g. BBC 2007a). Political exiles, the United States and the BBC prefer

the old name 'Burma', which stems from British colonial days. The United Nations, ASEAN, Japan and many other nations have adopted 'Myanmar' as the official name. The Military Junta officially switched to 'Union of Myanmar' in 1989, which was followed by an official name change for the capital - from 'Rangoon' to 'Yangon' (The Boston Globe 2007). Yet, critics argue that this move lacked legitimacy, as it was made by an unelected Junta, who paid no attention to the actual 1990 election results: a landslide 82% voted for the National League of Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma News International 1990, Democratic Voice of Burma 1990). Today exile groups still use 'Burma' because it was the name of the country before they fled during the 1988 protests, and also organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) use the name 'Burma' intentionally. The US have made an official stance in saying that they will also stick with the pre 1989-name, emphasising:

**"The democratically elected but never convened Parliament of 1990 does not recognize the name change, and the democratic opposition continues to use the name 'Burma'. Due to consistent support for the democratically elected leaders, the US government likewise uses 'Burma'."**

**US State Department 2007 website, no page number**

On the other hand, the United Nations, bound by what the sovereign government says, uses the name 'Myanmar'. Notably however, Mathieson (Human Rights Watch Asia 2007) notes that the name change is more hotly de-

bated *outside* the country than by its citizens, many of whom are now used to the change. It might be tempting to accept the name-change of 1989 given the colonial associations with 'Burma', but the author will continue to use the name 'Burma'.

## The tourism boycott debate

To go or not to go - that is the question in the context of Burma. The boycott on tourism began in response to the military government's Visit Myanmar Year of 1996, which aimed at bringing foreign investment into the country through business, especially tourism (e.g. Hall 1997). Hotels were being built, infrastructure was developed, and cosmetic renovations were taking place in order to attract visitors. Much of this work notoriously used forced labour. The response from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and international organisations was a call to boycott Burma as a tourist destination, until the government had made visible progress towards democracy. It is argued that visiting Burma can be seen to give moral support to the military junta, as it transfers to the dictatorship a sense of respectability and credibility. In the view of the Myanmar State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), "tourism will replace criticism from abroad" (General Khin Nyunt 1995, Human Rights Watch 2007).

## Don't go!

The wider issue of tourism to Burma also needs to address the fact that each tourist, unwillingly or not, financially supports a totalitarian military regime. The junta is known for eliminating any formal opposition to their rule, but have

over the years provided extremely stable political environments in which tourism has flourished. The military junta constantly uses visitor counts as an excuse to legitimise repression – if 660.000 people visited Burma in 2006, then they all accepted the fact that Burma was a nice place to visit (Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2007). However, another fact is that much, perhaps all, of the Burmese tourist infrastructure is military-owned (see Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Karen Human Rights Group, Burma Watch International, Aung San Suu Kyi). Thus each tourist who visits any of the Pagodas, who uses any of their airlines, or who stays at any hotels, puts money directly or indirectly into the generals' pockets. The foreign exchange that tourism brings to the regime helps it to increase its oversized military: the SPDC was virtually bankrupt in 1988, but used foreign investment and currency to double the size of its military throughout the 1990s (Burma Campaign UK 2003; Guardian 2007). The presence of tourists alone, whether or not they use such facilities, may even be seen to provide justification to carry out such projects. Also the highly-aware, 'ethical' tourists will find it difficult to avoid using some government-linked businesses and facilities, particularly public transport (Voices for Burma 2007), and it is impossible to escape the purchase of a visa and airport tax; also, 80% of money exchange facilities in the country are filled by the government, and the other 20% are quite possibly linked to the government (Lonely Planet 2003).

Human rights reports (see for instance Amnesty International, OXFAM, UNESCO) on Burma/Myanmar also illustrate the interrelationship between human rights abuses and tourism: slaved labour in the name of tourism has been reported continuously, but particularly since the Junta's announcement of its 'Visit Myanmar Year'. There are cases of overnight-displacements of young girls and boys, who are forced to build hotels during daytime, are raped at night, and often die of malnutrition during the construction (Human Rights Watch 2007b, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development 2005; Shan



Marcelle Gørgen 2007

#### Quo Vadis Burma?

Women's Action Network; Tutu, Havel and Suu Kyi 2006). At the same time the Military Junta has acknowledged that tourism is a vital source of much-needed income and investment. Clearly, the situation in Burma is bleak, with the Economist (2007b) noting "George Orwell's best book about Burma is not 'Burmese Days', but '1984'". So overall, the question on whether to go or not brings into focus, in a personal way, the same dilemma that also international businesses and foreign governments face when deciding whether and how to deal with one of the world's most pernicious regimes. Do we isolate, believing that any contact would add legitimacy to the unelected military junta? Or do we engage, hoping to gain some influence?

The tourist loves coming to Burma, if only because it has been closed off for so long, and is perceived as relatively 'new and exotic' compared to neighbouring countries. Burma lures because it still seems to have an air of 'old Asia' to it, which other countries are losing quickly, and 'the old' is what many travellers seek (see ThornTree Travel Forum Myanmar). So it is no secret that there are taboos about travelling to Burma because many political figures have joined the 'I'm not going' campaigns (Guardian, BBC, Rough Guide). Amongst

them is Tony Blair, who stressed that "I would urge anyone who may be thinking of visiting Burma on holiday to consider carefully whether by their actions they are helping to support the regime and prolong such dreadful abuses" (Burma Campaign UK 2005). Clearly, campaigners want to discourage trade, investment, and tourism, which is highly influenced by Aung San Suu Kyi - for many people, her call for a boycott is a good enough reason to stay away.

#### Go!

On the other hand, several organizations argue exactly the opposite, in that they believe in cultural exchange, bringing foreign ideas into the country, engaging with the people and simply showing the Burmese that the rest of the world has not forgotten them. But 'the Lady' (as she is called in Burma) responded:

**"Burmese people know their own problems better than anyone else. They know what they want - they want democracy - and many have died for it. To suggest that there's anything new that tourists can teach the people of Burma about their situation is not simply patronising - it's also racist."**

**Aung San Suu Kyi, 1999**

Notably, Suu Kyi was, for many years, beyond criticism, her reputation emphasised by memories of the NLD's electoral triumph, her 1991 Nobel peace prize, and the many interviews she gave during temporary relaxation of her house arrest. Now it seems that her reputation is suffering some backlash. Critics argue that the failure of the democratic movement in Burma may be partly due to Suu Kyi's inflexibility, particularly regarding her support for the international boycott of investment and tourism, which has led the Junta to arrange partnerships with ASEAN, Russia, and India (Economist, 2007). In fact, some critics go as far as saying that her unyielding stance jeopardises the hopes of the democratic movement, adding that she may have become part of the problem, not the solution. The anti-boycott side also argues that more than 10 years of boycotting has not helped the situation in any way, but has rather hurt the 'people on the ground' (Voices for Burma 2007).

Another compelling argument against the tourism boycott is the lack of economic importance of tourism, compared to trade with its Asian neighbours: Thailand, India, and China. Time Asia discussed the importance of Chinese trade, aid and investment to Burma, with trade alone being worth US\$1.1 billion in 2004. China is by far the largest supplier of foreign investment to Burma, accounting for US\$126.6 million in 2004/05. Burma's other principal exports include teak, pulses and textiles, and it is one of the world's largest producers of opiates. In 2004/05, exports brought in a total of US\$ 2.9 billion in foreign currency (Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2007; Xinhua News Service 2007). Until this situation changes the tourist's visa fee, or the lack of it, will

probably make very little difference to the regime's coffers.

Interestingly, when asked about 'alternative tourism' in an interview, Aung San Suu Kyi conceded "visitors to the country can be useful, depending on what they do and how they go about it". Clearly, there is still the moral argument for not supplying the regime with any revenue at all – which is impractical –, and the 'ethical' tourists to Burma are advised to spend their money carefully, in order to ensure that the amount of money going to the government is kept at a minimum (see for example: Voices for Burma 2007). Still, the fact remains that visiting Burma will inevitably supply the regime with at least a small amount of income, which some see as a necessary evil that can be outweighed by the benefits of spending money on small-scale, locally-owned products and services.

But two questions arise: how many tourists really travel like that, and how does the tourist know that his money is staying in the community? According to the Myanmar Ministry figures, there are 733 registered travel and tour companies. Tourist arrivals in the country through Rangoon entry checkpoint were over 47,000 in the first four months of 2007, which represents a remarkable 20% increase from the previous year, at least according to the government statistics (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism 2006, Xinhua General News Service 2007).

The Myanmar government states that of all types of tours, package tours accounted for 25%, while free independent travelers accounted for 47%. The Myanmar statistics office, however, does not elaborate on how one is classified as a free independent traveler. Burma so far features over 600 hotels with 23,000

rooms, in addition to the 733 tour companies.

### The future?

The question of whether to go to Burma remains a pressing issue, and a very personal decision for each potential traveller. Will boycotting tourism bring democracy to Burma? It has now been 10 years since the boycott started, and Burma is perhaps only a little bit closer to achieving political change, which might possibly have nothing to do with tourism. Instead the boycott 'short-term strategy' is starting to look like a 'long-term position'. Have the recent events in Burma changed the debate in any way? What is the future?

On the surface, normalcy has returned to Burma: people go about their daily chores with grave faces and avoid talking to foreigners. The fact that normalcy has returned to Burma so quickly is sad. This marked the first time during military oppression that the monks started a peaceful march, and now around 2000 of them have been detained (Burmanet 2007; Irrawady Media 2007), their fate unknown. Those that have not been detained are "waiting for the knock on the door" (Economist 2007a, pg 35).

Currently, the visitor does not see many smiling faces in a country that is usually known for its 'friendly people' – but the brutality of the Junta's reaction to the monk's peaceful march seemed to have touched a deep nerve in the Burmese, a devout Buddhist people. Serious negotiations between the regime and the opposition, followed by a transition to power-sharing and quasi-democracy is not entirely out of the question, yet. This can only happen, however, with increased pressure from Burma's neighbours, and clearer signs from within



Huge Prison Complex in Mandalay

Michael Waibel 2002

showing the regime that it is losing its grip on the country. But how does tourism play into all this? The arguments for and against the boycott remain the same, yet there are several speculative, future-scenarios that could happen in Burma.

### Scenario ONE:

Burma's future remains bleak, and the generals are there to stay. Due to media's short attention span, people will slowly forget about the Burma situation. As the Military has successfully cut off all Internet in the country, the signs of decreasing media attention are already evident. The world's media will move to other issues, and will only sporadically re-capture the issue of a totalitarian regime in Burma. Tourism will recover from a short slump in incoming tourists. If anything, the 'Saffron uprising' has put Burma on the tourist's map, because any publicity is good publicity. Those who were against the boycott before are not likely to change their position, but will rather argue for increased dialogue with the Burmese people themselves, and thus encourage tourism further. The pro-boycott side, on the other hand, will probably continue their quest as well, arguing that only increased pressure on the Burmese Generals will effect some change. The debate will be continued, and emotions are likely to run higher than before.

### Scenario TWO:

Burma is moving towards democracy and peace. In the best-case scenario, Burma's generals will start negotiations with Aung San Suu Kyi, which go beyond the token meetings they have had before. Perhaps Suu Kyi will, one day, legitimately lead her country into a new era of democracy. Democracy in Burma also means that a substantial number of tourists will come to Burma suddenly as the boycott debate is likely to die in the event of democracy. Also, the number of tourists will be possibly increasing exponentially over the years, similarly to other countries in South East Asia, which have been closed off for a long time (e.g. Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos). It

is here to note that Burma could learn from its neighbours' tourism planning mistakes, and be aware of the traps of 'well-practiced' capitalism.

### Scenario THREE:

Burma is moving towards democracy, but is shattered by civil war. Unfortunately, a civil-war scenario is not too unlikely, because the Burmese are a very divided people. Not only will it be difficult to sustain some sort of 'normalcy' in a democratic Burma after 45 years of military oppression, but also it will be difficult to please the diverse ethnic groups that are scattered all over the country. It may be frivolous to add here, but if there is civil war, then there will be no tourism, except of a very few 'adventure tourists'.

Sympathy will not solve the problem, but action is needed. Overall it is clear that the Burmese monks have been bravely showing the world that the situation is not hopeless, but that there are, in fact, activities happening *inside* the country. These protests however, will only gain momentum if they are supported from *outside*. Countries such as China, India, Thailand, and Singapore (ASEAN) hold the key in negotiating peace in the region, and must therefore be held accountable for their actions, or non-actions.

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