

THE POLITICS OF TOURISM: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE MALDIVES

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The nature of the relationship between politics and tourism, encompassing the politics of religion, is examined in this paper with particular reference to the case of the Maldives. Although marketed as a tropical island paradise, the country is experiencing political uncertainty due to challenges to the long standing government from a democratic movement and religious radicalism. These trends and their impacts on tourism, which itself is a topic of political debate, are explained and the tourism industry is seen to overlook discordant political and religious realities in its promotion. However, it is argued that a destination's politics cannot be ignored and that there must be awareness amongst all stakeholders and appropriate responses to political events if tourism is to deal successfully with turbulent times.

Keywords: *crisis management, destination marketing, politics, religion, The Maldives*

INTRODUCTION

The Maldives is a popular tourist destination which is advertised as a tropical island paradise, but where the realities are somewhat at odds with the idyllic images perpetrated. Disconnections have been illuminated by recent events in the political environment which reveal how politics can impinge on tourism and tourism assume a political role in ways which it is difficult for tourists and the tourism industry to ignore, even if they might prefer to do so. Close ties bind politics and tourism and understanding of the latter and its management demands an appreciation of the former.



After a review of the literature and summary of tourism in the Maldives, attention is given to wider conditions and their presentation in tourism promotion. The politicisation of tourism is then discussed, incorporating debate about tourism impacts. A bomb explosion in which tourists were injured and its implications is considered before a final conclusion which reflects on the lessons to be learnt from the experience of the Maldives. A case study approach was chosen as suitable for the purpose (Yin, 2003) and findings are derived from materials in the public domain gathered from a range of print and electronic sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The multiple interactions between tourism and politics are examined in an expanding literature which embraces a variety of themes (Cheong and Miller, 2000). While the focus is commonly on the machinery and decisions of government, politics can be conceived as power relations in general and such a definition means that issues of the politics of tourism are addressed in much tourism research outside the strand dedicated to it specifically. Whether the broader or narrower concept is applied, an appreciation of politics emerges as central to comprehending the place of tourism in the world and the underlying dynamics of the industry.

In terms of formal policy and planning, tourism is seen as an industrial sector of appeal to governments. They are usually eager to maximise economic returns, although approaches differ depending on political systems and cultures (Williams and Shaw, 1998). Tourism also constitutes social and political capital which can be garnered and expended by ruling elites in nation building, often connected to hegemonic agendas (Palmer, 1999; Peleggi, 1996). Stability and security are shown to be critical and their absence will deter tourists and the tourism industry which are very averse to risk (Richter, 1999), yet there are exceptions in which tourists are drawn by trouble and volatility (Brin, 2006).

The adverse consequences of instability and insecurity has acquired greater pertinence due to mounting alarm over terrorism (Richter, 1992; Pizam and Mansfeld, 1996; Sonmez, 1998), but tourists have demonstrated a willingness to return to stricken destinations as long as there is no regular recurrence of agitation (Pizam and Fleischer, 2002). Stability is not the preserve of liberal democracies and can be provided by autocratic regimes of the political right and left (Hall and Oehlers, 2000). Brutal military dictatorships may, however, be unpalatable to

international visitors and pose practical problems for companies attempting to do business as evidenced by the situation in Myanmar/Burma (Henderson, 2003a).

The religion of destination populations has possible ramifications for politics and tourism independently and at their points of intersection. It can be tapped by governments to foster unity while also serving as a motivation for travel and a tourist attraction of miscellaneous types (Rinschede, 1992; Vukonik, 1996). At the same time, religion can cause internal and external strife and extremism and discord discourage visitors, especially when it finds political expression. Locations prone to religious fractures which erupt into social and political contention are likely to perform poorly as tourist destinations.

Recently, international tourist flows have been impacted on by the actions of a small minority of Muslim radicals who have abused their religion as a justification for aggression, leading to Islam's association with terrorist groupings such as Al-Qaeda (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004). Mutual suspicions between Muslims and non-Muslims have intensified and these sentiments, reinforced by incidents of confrontation, have prompted doubts about visitor safety (Henderson, 2003b). Islamic countries once regarded as more moderate and tolerant such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia and Turkey have been mentioned in Western government travel advisories warning that citizens are possible terrorist targets (FCO, 2007a), eroding tourist confidence.

These trends also affect Middle East states with a history of shunning Western style tourism for reasons of its perceived incompatibility with Islam. Several have been re-evaluating this stance (Daher, 2006) and are looking to develop tourism and diversify economies over-dependent on oil, hailing Dubai as an example of what can be achieved (DCTM, 2007). Any government presiding over a predominantly Muslim population in a country aspiring to have a sizeable international tourism industry must strive to reconcile the dictates of a religion crucial to citizens and their everyday lives with the expectations of tourists and the tourism industry which are sometimes competing and conflicting (Din, 1989; Timothy and Iverson, 2006). The task is more compelling if tourism revenues are of such a magnitude that there are serious financial penalties from a downturn in arrivals and sullied image when the two cultures clash violently (Aziz, 1995). Options are to ignore or downplay Islam in marketing or concentrate on its more colourful and non-threatening representations (Hashim et al., 2007; Schneider and Sonmez, 1999; Wood, 1984), but the interpretations may be contradicted by obvious harsher realities. The dilemmas and attempts at resolution are illuminated

by the case of the Maldives which also affords insights into other facets of the relationship between politics and tourism.

TOURISM IN THE MALDIVES

The Maldives consists of a chain of 26 coral atolls straddling the equator south west of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. The country occupies an area of sea measuring 754 kilometres in length and 118 kilometres wide where there are 1192 islands, only a small proportion of which are inhabited, and almost 80% of land is a metre or less in height (Domroes, 2001). Its distinctive geography and tropical climate are valuable tourism resources and the industry has grown rapidly since the 1970s when the first resorts were constructed on two islands. By 2007, there were 89 resort islands with over 17,000 beds and a further 35 islands were available for development (MTCA, 2007a).

Arrivals expanded correspondingly from 42,000 in 1980 to over 600,000 in 2004, but the Indian Ocean tsunami at the end of that year interrupted the pattern and tourism losses were estimated to be US\$300 million (Carlsen, 2006). Recovery was well underway by 2006 when international tourist numbers reached nearly 602,000 (MTCA, 2007a) and there are projections of over a million by 2012 (MTCA, 2007b). Formal responsibility for the industry rests with the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation (MTCA) and the Maldives Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) and the government also has a 45% share in the Maldives Tourism Development Corporation which was formed in 2006 (MTCA, 2007a).

Authorities have sought to exercise strict control over tourism which has been directed by a series of master plans dating from 1980. All islands are government owned and leased to private parties for resort development, 47% operated by local companies and the remainder by either foreign or joint ventures (MTCA, 2007a). The third plan runs from 2007 until 2011 and, like its forerunners, aims at “developing tourism in harmony with nature; facilitating private sector investment; developing human resources; increasing employment opportunities; diversifying markets and products”. New to the current plan is “spreading the economic benefits of tourism across the archipelago more equitably”. Its stated vision is one of “expanding and strengthening the Maldives tourism industry as an instrument of economic and social development in a manner that benefits all Maldivians in all parts of the country” (MTCA, 2007b: 11).

Expensive and exclusive vacations are offered, some in luxury private villa complexes, although the intention is that 10 resorts will be built to cater to the middle market. Western Europeans, led by the Italians and British, comprise more than 76% of visitors and Japan is the primary Asian generator ahead of rapidly growing China and India (MTCA, 2007a). Most visitors travel on organised packages purchased from tour operators in their country of residence and the main purposes of visits are relaxation (53%), honeymoons (30%) and diving (15%) (MTCA, 2007b). Resort islands are reserved for foreign tourists who can only travel to those inhabited by Maldivians on escorted tours in a bid to limit contact and socio-cultural disruption. Selling points seem set to remain the natural environment, resort facilities and leisure pursuits, but the third master plan does propose enhancement and promotion of culture and heritage tourism (MTCA, 2007b).

THE WIDER FRAMEWORK

Formerly a British Protectorate, the islands of the Maldives attained independence in 1968. Ruled by President Gayoom since 1978, the republic has been comparatively stable with the exception of failed military coups in the 1980s. However, the regime has come under escalating criticism for the suppression of freedom of speech and political repression. Questions of the extent of presidential power, independence of the judiciary, police brutality and other human rights violations are pressing and there have been allegations of torture, arbitrary arrest and detention without proper trial (Amnesty International, 2007; BBC, 2007a; FOM, 2006; Raman, 2004; Ramachandran, 2005). A movement is calling for greater democracy and there have been some steps, albeit tentative, in this direction. Restrictions on political parties have been relaxed and constitutional revisions, a bill of rights and multi-party elections are planned (Goldsmith, 2007; UNDP, 2007a; UNDP, 2007b).

The economy relies heavily on fishing and tourism (ADB, 2006; Sathiendrakumar and Tisdell, 1989; Shareef and McAleer, 2007) and the latter contributed over 30% of GDP, 27% of government revenue and 70% of foreign exchange earnings in 2006 (MTCA, 2007a). It also accounts for about 20% of employment (Euromonitor, 2007) and is recognised in the seventh national plan as an engine of future growth (MPND, 2007). These statistics highlight the economic gains from global tourism, but prompt concerns about dependency and consequent vulnerability to external shocks. There are leakages to add to the equation

and items such as foodstuffs, building materials, furnishings and souvenirs sold in hotel shops are imported. Only 54% of tourism employees are locals (MPND, 2007) so that substantial amounts of foreign worker wages are repatriated alongside profits of companies headquartered overseas.

The incumbent regime has claimed credit for economic advances, but the 2004 tsunami was a devastating socio-economic as well as environmental blow and described as a 20 year setback for the country by the United Nations (UNDP, 2005). It was also a test of government competence and integrity and there has been some dissatisfaction about the slow pace of recovery across the stricken region (IPS, 2006).

Maldivian citizens number about 400,000 and inhabit 194 islands. Most of these have a population below 1,000 (FCO, 2007b) while the capital island of Malé accommodates about one third of residents and is becoming overcrowded. The country has some of the best economic, social and health indicators in South Asia and the UN places it 98 out of 177 in its Human Development Index and 36 out of 102 in its Human Poverty Index (UNDP, 2006). Another report calculates that poverty, measured by those living on less than a dollar daily, fell from 3% in 1997 to 1% in 2004 when per capita income averaged US\$2,510 (SAARC, 2006).

However, income disparities are notable between the richer and better resourced Malé and less prosperous outer atolls. Demographically, the proportion of young unemployed males is growing and there are fears of their disaffection which is made worse by the lack of tertiary education facilities. There is also a gender imbalance in the labour force and Maldivian women are heavily under-represented because many jobs undertaken by men necessitate living away from home and females are left to look after the household. Drug abuse, child malnourishment and access to public health care are all urgent matters to be tackled by the authorities (ADB, 2007; Pardasani, 2006; UNDP, 2007a).

Islam has been followed on the islands since the twelfth century and is the official religion of all the population who are Sunni Muslims. Public worship of other faiths is illegal as is the importation of materials deemed contrary to Islam (FCO, 2007a). President Gayoom's government professes to be the custodian of the religion which is under the supervision of the moderate leaning Supreme Council. Religious regulations are less strict in the Maldives than parts of the Middle East, but media reports observe greater "Islamicisation" of society and politics (BBC, 2007b and 2007c; The Independent, 2006). Adhaalath, a registered political party, is urging the enactment of full Islamic or Shariah law and

individual preachers, who have considerable sway amongst poorer citizens, are espousing a radical ideology. Such moves are resisted by the government and religious dissent is regarded as a dangerous conduit for political opposition.

There is some evidence linking radicalism with terrorism and the Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (personal communication, 2007) believes that a few Maldivians formed cells on returning home after studying at religious schools overseas. These share a similar philosophy to that of Al-Qaeda which advocates assaults on Westerners and Western interests. They also object to state mosques on the grounds that these have been built with money from tourism which sanctions un-Islamic behaviour, preferring to worship underground and thereby provoking confrontations with security personnel (BBC, 2007b). Officials are attempting to foster less extreme versions of Islam and contain the spread of radicalism, but progress is difficult to measure.

Dress is an outward manifestation of religious conservatism and more women are covering themselves fully in the black *boda buruga*, in defiance of its formal proscription (Ramachandran, 2005). The beards and attire which are markers of what is often called Wahhabism, a branch of Islam synonymous with Saudi Arabia and judged to be ultra conservative, are growing in popularity amongst men (BBC, 2007b; Independent, 2006; Minivan News, 2007b). However, there are contrasts between lifestyles in the capital and remoter island settlements where conservative Khatibs or chiefs remain powerful figures (BBC, 2007d).

The Maldives has thus entered a stage of political change and possible transition (ADB, 2007; FCO, 2007b; UNDP, 2007a) in which there is scope for clashes of a political, religious, social and economic origin either separately or in combination. The government is under challenge from democratic and religious movements whilst embarking on ambitious programmes of economic development, poverty reduction and political reform. An additional preoccupation is rising sea levels and the need for response strategies (ADB, 2007). Such conditions form the backdrop against which tourism policies are formulated and the tourism industry operates, shaping aspects of the visitor experience. Any instability or outbreaks of violence would threaten the regime and tourism, the latter dependant upon the preservation of stability in appearance if not actuality.

The desire to communicate messages about peace and tranquillity is evident in the principal 2007 English language guide produced in print and electronic format (MTPB, 2007a). Notwithstanding ongoing

uncertainties which predate the publication, politics rarely intrudes. Allusions to Islam are scarce and deal with selected and uncontentious facets while society at large is reduced to appealing cultural and heritage attributes. In conformity with most destination marketing, anything hinting at dubious visitor safety is sidestepped. The presentation is indicative of commercial imperatives, but also of attempts to depoliticise the country, its people and religion which are noticeable too in the sales and marketing of private industry at home and overseas. Whether such a stance is entirely appropriate is debatable given the ways in which conditions at the destination impinge on tourism and are leading to its politicisation in a manner outlined in the next section

THE POLITICISATION OF TOURISM

Tourism in the Maldives has had a political dimension since its inception due to the tight control exercised by government and the financial interest in resorts of its members and their allies. A thriving tourism industry can be harnessed to hegemonic ambitions and it seems probable that success as a destination has been exploited to consolidate the power and standing of the regime. Various other stakeholders within and outside of government have utilised tourism as a tool to further their own political agendas. The aftermath of the tsunami also raised political questions about tourism and there was a feeling in some quarters that the needs of the tourism industry had priority over those of nationals, some of whom were without adequate housing or drinking water for an extended period while resorts were quickly repaired or rebuilt (Action Aid, 2006; Tourism Concern, 2005).

The government and its supporters maintain that President Gayoom's almost 30 years of uninterrupted rule has averted the political instability which has blighted the region. Tourism strategies in particular have transformed the economy so that incomes are substantially above those in much of South Asia. Revenue from tourism has been spent on education and health services, improving standards of living and the quality of life (BBC, 2007c). Government opponents reply that average incomes conceal an uneven distribution of wealth and that a majority of the population are still poor and denied fundamental rights. They contend that tourism earnings have not been fairly allocated, one local critic pointing out that "after 30 years as an exclusive tourist destination, Maldives has not produced a top rated chef and many positions in the industry are still dominated by expatriate staff" (O'Shea, 2006).

There is also disquiet about the inequities and sustainability of an industry in which affluent tourists are pampered in luxurious surroundings while impoverished Maldivians struggle to eke out an existence (The Times, 2007). Officials and their cronies are chastised for accruing inappropriate individual gains (Himal South Asian, 2003), independent observers concurring that there is a 'prevalent conflict of interest' in which "tourism policy is formulated by officials with substantial personal ownership stakes" (ADB, 2007: 5).

Political discussion of impacts encompasses cultural conflicts (Faizal et al., 2005) and international tourists display attitudes and behaviour which may defy Islamic principles. Scanty dress, public displays of physical affection between members of the opposite sex and sexual permissiveness, drinking alcohol and eating non-halal foodstuffs are all vetoed in Muslim teachings. Nudism and topless sunbathing at resorts have always been forbidden (FCO, 2007a) and Islamic groups have criticised tourists for bringing Western standards to the country and weakening Islamic culture (The Telegraph, 2007). Finally and despite the endeavours of planners, tourism has been responsible for environmental damage which includes beach erosion, reef destruction and pollution (Domroes, 2001).

The industry was drawn directly into a political debate when Friends of the Maldives (FOM), an organisation based in the UK and dedicated to increasing awareness of human rights abuses in the country, called for a boycott in 2005 of those resorts owned by past and present members of the government or their families and close associates. A total of 21 resorts were thus categorised in 2006 (SusTravel.co.uk, 2006). Visitors and tour operators and travel agents from overseas were asked to make an ethical and informed choice by rejecting accommodation with links to the regime. Organisers emphasised that the boycott was partial and not designed to stop tourists coming or destroy the industry, although they were rebuked for trying to do so and ultimately overturn the government. The campaign met with little apparent enthusiasm, any support obscured by a sharp fall in arrivals resulting from the tsunami, but it was backed by the 2006 Lonely Planet Maldives guidebook (FOM, 2007a) and Tourism Concern, a UK pressure group (Tourism Concern, 2007). There was a reappraisal of the boycott strategy after a bomb explosion in 2007 which put issues of the politics of tourism in the spotlight as explained in the final section.

THE SULTAN PARK BOMB

The device which exploded in the early afternoon of 29 September 2007 in the Sultan Park, one of the capital's main attractions, was reported to have been handmade and packed with nails. Two tourists from Japan and eight from China sustained minor injuries, but a British couple on honeymoon were seriously burnt and hospitalised before being repatriated for further treatment (BBC, 2007e; CNA, 2007; The Independent, 2007a). Suspects had been arrested by 30 September and there were 11 men in custody four days after the blast (Haveeru Daily, 2007a). A focus of initial investigations was Islamic organisations and there was fighting when a mosque was raided in early October on an island with a reputation for sheltering extremists, amongst them a Muslim militia, and 60 men were imprisoned (Minivan News, 2007c).

The MTPB acknowledged the bombing on its website, describing the affair and progress made in bringing the culprits to justice. Reassurances were offered that the blast was an "isolated incident", the first of its kind in the history of the Maldives' which was known for the friendliness of its populace. There were assertions that it was "business as usual" and that calm and normality prevailed (MTPB, 2007b), the injured couple reputed to have "assured bravely that they would return to the Maldives after recovery" (MTPB, 2007c). The MTPB, MTCA and industry representatives from the Maldives and overseas assembled the day after the bombing and concluded that any damage would be short lived, but worldwide transmission of messages about visitor security was deemed paramount (MTPB, 2007d).

A political as well as police and commercial response was required and a government spokesperson stressed that the bombing would be taken "very seriously because tourism is our life blood" (The Independent, 2007b). The Tourism Minister spoke of a "sense of embarrassment among Maldivian people" who he said had positive attitudes towards tourism except for a "small circle" of hostile dissenters. The President visited the victims in hospital to express his sympathy, deplored the attack and vowed that the perpetrators would be caught (MTPB, 2007d). He also blamed those supporting a tourism boycott and his political opponents for destabilising the country and inciting disobedience (CNA, 2007). The government and industry funded the medical emergency flight home of the two Britons who were bid farewell by a gathering of officials (Haveeru Daily, 2007b).

The political opposition reacted to the bombing with statements of condemnation. Members of Adhaalath, FOM and the MDP echoed

official denunciations and the FOM denied implications that it was partly responsible. It announced a temporary suspension of the resort boycott, to be reviewed at the end of October, in a decision attributed to understanding the “potentially significant ramifications for the Maldives tourism industry and in solidarity with the people” (FOM, 2007b). The Adhaalath chairman argued that religious differences did not warrant assaults on non-Islamic visitors who must be welcomed (Minivan News, 2007a).

News of an official plan to counter political agitation and stem religious radicalism was broadcast in the weeks which followed. Mooted measures included steps against extremist preachers, encouragement of moderate Islamic scholars, updating of the religious curriculum and rigorous enforcement of the law prohibiting women from wearing the full veil. While the government was censured for delayed intervention and ignoring earlier warnings about the emergence of extremism (Haveeru Daily, 2007c), conspiracy theories also started circulating which implied that the security services had a hand in the bombing with a view to providing an excuse for an offensive against the regime’s opponents (The Independent, 2007a). Discovery of the truth and final resolution may be some way off and the various positions adopted and degree of political posturing confirm how the bombing has become an event of political and religious import and introduced a new dimension to the politics of tourism in the Maldives.

The bombing alone was not as destructive in its immediate effects on tourism as some of the terrorist outrages which have marred the opening years of the twenty first century. The fact that there were no fatalities restrained the degree and tone of international media coverage, minimising cancellations and facilitating restoration of the status quo (Haveeru Daily, 2007d). However, the image of the Maldives has been sullied and any further strikes or adverse political happenings could be more harmful. Marketers can no longer boast with absolute confidence of the seemingly “permanent and sustainable” appeal of “unique, clean, peaceful, beautiful tropical islands” (MTCA, 2007b: 49). The destination has proven itself as exposed as the rest of the world to terrorism, reflected in a formal travel advisory issued by Australia which warns of the risk and urges visitors to be diligent when in the capital (ADFAT, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Politics in the Maldives is evolving and final outcomes of the developments outlined in this paper are unknown. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the country's political circumstances have determined key features of its tourism industry in the past and present and will continue to do so in the future. Political debate about tourism is taking place against a backdrop of more profound tensions, encompassing religious radicalism, which could presage upheaval. Serious disturbance would weaken the foundation of stability which is a prerequisite if tourism is to prosper, but tourism itself could fuel dissension and increasingly be seen as one element of or a separate political problem demanding a political solution. At the same time, an appreciation of tourism's importance and its reliance upon a stable and ordered environment may help to resist disruptive tendencies and avert a political crisis; this notion can, however, be cited by the incumbent government to justify maintenance of the status quo and end in perpetuation of its deficiencies.

These observations have a wider relevance beyond the particular case, despite its many distinctive qualities, and the close ties which bind tourism and politics in these and other ways are evident around the world. The 2007 bombing in the Maldives within its wider context suggests that tropical paradises exist only in the imagination and that the tourism industry and tourists must come to terms with unpleasant and discordant realities if tourism is to survive turbulent times. This involves anticipating and preparing for the unexpected, striving for transparency and integrity in the relationship between government and business, being open and honest about hazards at destinations and endeavouring to involve residents in the development process and allocate them an equitable share of its rewards.

Tourists have become more wary so that the industry will have to try to secure an acceptable balance in its communications between reassurance and the conveying of accurate information about destination conditions, some of which might be disturbing, if it is to retain credibility and market confidence. Due respect must also be given to religious sensitivities and sensibilities based upon a proper knowledge of unfamiliar and perhaps alien faiths. Tourism can thereby be a benign influence and force for the positive changes which are to be especially welcomed in the developing world as well as a channel for cross-cultural understanding.

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