

## **Development of crisis communication framework in times of political crises: A case study of Thailand. Research Note**

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Using Thailand as a case study, the aims of this research are to examine the understanding of tourist perceptions in times of political crises, and to develop a crisis communication framework for political crisis situations which has not been created previously. This study will address political crisis concerns, investigating political risk perceptions, fear of political violence and victimisation of tourists, as well as the effect this has on destination image and choice, information sources, decision-making processes and tourist behaviour. Additionally, the research will explore the differing perceptions of political violence and risk by tourism sectors, which include tour operators, travel agents, travel advisors, trade media journalists and representatives of key agencies associated with destination marketing.

The topic of political stability in tourist destinations is of vital importance globally, as stability may affect a tourist's decision to visit an area. Political stability in favourable economic conditions is a fundamental determinant for successful tourism development (Lewis, 1975; Richter and Waugh, 1986). The success or failure of tourist destinations depends on their ability to provide perceptions of a safe and secure environment for visitors. A politically unstable country experiencing violent incidents can see an immediate effect in terms of a decline in the influx of foreign visitors and damage to its destination image. Political instability can impede tourism by affecting the fragile nature of a destination's safe image, particularly when such instability is tied to military activities (Hall, 1994). As destination safety has become a fundamental requirement

for most visitors, fluctuations in perceptions of current political situations may affect travel to destinations, particularly following political incidents that suggests a destination poses potential risks to tourists. Thus concerns for safety and security within the tourism industry warrant attention and research.

Within the literature relating to political instability, there have only been a small number of research studies into the impact of political crises with an emphasis on tourist perceptions. The impact of military coups on the Ghanaian tourism industry was considered by Teye (1988) and it was found that the frequent military coups impeded every facet of the country's socio-economic structure. From a corporate perspective, Poirier (1997) studied political risks for Multi National Enterprise (MNE) investment and concluded that certain developments within the host country do pose a potential risk to tourism investment. From a destination perspective, Kowalewski (1987) conducted a survey of strike activity in Asia and found that it had a low impact on MNE activity, especially when the government in the region favoured MNE investment. Richter (1999) also commented on how political instability disrupted the tourism industries of the Philippines, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. With regards to industry responsiveness, Calvek (2002) studied the crisis behaviour of tour operators in Croatia, and concluded that there was always an attempt to minimise the possible risk to clients. On a general note, Seddighi, Nuttall and Theocharous et al. (2001) drew attention to the need for assessment, evaluation and analysis of the various relationships between political instability and the tourism industry with an emphasis on cultural background. Notably for this research, Sonmez (1998) has concluded that risk perceptions among tourists might change after a destination had been chosen, and attain levels that could cause drastic changes in their subsequent travel behaviour.

From the literature review to date, there is a need for more studies into how political crises can affect the tourism industry with an emphasis on the crisis management of tourist perceptions. Indeed, Hall and O'Sullivan (1996) concluded that perceived risks of political protest, social

unrest, civil war and terrorist actions can cause tourists to alter their travel behaviour. Therefore, crisis communication management is included in this doctoral research with an aim to limit, control and balance the negative information conveyed through the media before and during the crisis, as well as throughout the crisis recovery phase (Mansfeld, 2006). Also whilst Lea and Small (1988) suggest five types of political instability, including wars, coups d'état, terrorism, riots and strikes, this study defines *political crisis* as any sudden or unpredictable political incident. These could be governmental, non-governmental or military acts which are disruptive to the tourism industry.

From the crisis communication literature, it is clear that there is a need to develop a more detailed and practical model that embraces and reflects the situational characteristics and the constraints imposed on tourists and tour operators, while engaged not only in the destination choice process but in all other stages of the travel behaviour sequence (Calvek, 2002). In conclusion, this study suggests that the provision of information on the security situation and on the level of risk to travellers to the affected destination should be regarded as a prerequisite and integrated into a crisis communication plan (Calvek, 2002).

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