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RECONSTRUCTING THAILAND'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE AFTER MILITARY COUP: NATION BRANDING AND TOURISM POLICY UNDER PRAYUTH CHAN-O-CHA ADMINISTRATION (2014-2018)

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 military coup in Thailand created political uncertainty that impacted the country's international image and the performance of its tourism sector. As a vital pillar of the national economy, the tourism sector faced significant pressure following the imposition of martial law and the issuance of travel advisories by several nations. In response, the administration of Prayuth Chan-o-cha implemented various tourism policies aimed not only at restoring tourist arrivals but also at rebuilding Thailand's international image. This study analyzes how tourism policies were utilized as an instrument for Thailand's nation branding between 2014 and 2018. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes document analysis—examining government publications, policy documents, reports from tourism authorities, and relevant academic literature. The analysis draws upon Simon Anholt's nation branding framework, which emphasizes the interplay between strategy, substance, and symbolic actions in shaping a nation's reputation. The findings indicate that the recovery of Thailand's tourism sector was supported by an integrated branding strategy, encompassing infrastructure development, the revitalization of destinations, the diversification of tourism products, enhanced regional connectivity, and international promotion. These policies were reinforced by efforts to cultivate positive perceptions regarding safety, accessibility, service quality, and the government's governance capacity. The study demonstrates that post-coup tourism policies served not merely as a tool for economic recovery, but also as an instrument of diplomacy to restore Thailand's credibility and international standing. Consequently, tourism has become a crucial component of Thailand's public diplomacy and soft power strategy in navigating the repercussions of domestic political instability.
Keywords: Nation branding, Tourism policy, Thailand.

ABSTRAK

Kudeta militer di Thailand pada tahun 2014 menimbulkan ketidakpastian politik yang berdampak terhadap citra internasional dan kinerja sektor pariwisata negara tersebut. Sebagai salah satu sektor penting bagi perekonomian nasional, pariwisata mengalami tekanan akibat pemberlakuan darurat militer dan penerbitan peringatan perjalanan oleh sejumlah negara. Menanggapi kondisi tersebut, pemerintahan Prayuth Chan-o-cha menerapkan berbagai kebijakan pariwisata yang tidak hanya ditujukan untuk memulihkan kunjungan wisatawan, tetapi juga untuk membangun kembali citra Thailand di tingkat internasional. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana kebijakan pariwisata digunakan sebagai instrumen *nation branding* Thailand pada periode 2014-2018. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis dokumen terhadap publikasi pemerintah, dokumen kebijakan, laporan otoritas pariwisata, serta literatur akademik yang relevan. Analisis menggunakan kerangka *Nation Branding* Simon Anholt yang menekankan keterkaitan antara *strategy, substance,* dan *symbolic actions* dalam membentuk reputasi suatu negara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemulihan pariwisata Thailand didukung oleh strategi branding yang terintegrasi melalui pengembangan infrastruktur, revitalisasi destinasi, diversifikasi produk wisata, peningkatan konektivitas regional, dan promosi internasional. Kebijakan tersebut diperkuat melalui upaya membangun persepsi mengenai keamanan, aksesibilitas, kualitas pelayanan, dan kapasitas tata kelola

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pemerintah. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kebijakan pariwisata pascakudeta tidak semata-mata berfungsi sebagai instrumen pemulihan ekonomi, tetapi juga sebagai instrumen diplomasi untuk memulihkan kredibilitas dan citra internasional Thailand. Dengan demikian, pariwisata menjadi bagian penting dari strategi *public diplomacy* dan *soft power* Thailand dalam menghadapi dampak ketidakstabilan politik domestik.
Kata kunci: Nation branding, Kebijakan pariwisata, Thailand.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between domestic political crises and international reputation has become an increasingly important concern in International Relations. Political instability not only undermines domestic governance but also shapes external perceptions of a state's legitimacy, security, and attractiveness. These reputational consequences often extend beyond the political sphere, affecting trade, investment, tourism, and diplomatic relations. Consequently, governments facing political crises are required to adopt strategies that restore international confidence while maintaining economic resilience. Among the available policy instruments, tourism has emerged as a significant mechanism through which states can rebuild international image and project political normalcy.

Traditionally regarded as an economic sector, tourism has increasingly assumed strategic importance within international politics. Tourism can operate as an instrument of soft power and public diplomacy by enabling states to communicate national identity, project cultural values, and influence foreign public perceptions (Nye, 2004). Unlike conventional diplomatic engagement, tourism creates direct interactions between international visitors and the host country, allowing foreign audiences to experience its culture, infrastructure, public services, and broader social environment. These experiences contribute to national reputation and can shape perceptions of political stability, institutional effectiveness, and social openness. Accordingly, tourism policy should be understood not only as an economic development initiative but also as part of a broader strategy for strengthening international attractiveness and credibility.

The strategic role of tourism becomes particularly evident in countries experiencing political instability. Domestic political crises can generate negative international perceptions that discourage foreign investment, reduce tourist arrivals, and weaken confidence in governmental institutions. In such circumstances, tourism recovery extends beyond restoring economic performance; it can also constitute an effort to reconstruct international legitimacy through policy performance and strategic communication. This perspective is consistent with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, which emphasises attraction as a source of influence, and with public diplomacy scholarship, which highlights sustained engagement with foreign publics in shaping international perceptions (Melissen, 2005).

Thailand provides a compelling case for examining the relationship between tourism policy and international image reconstruction. Before the 2014 military coup, Thailand had established itself as one of the world's leading tourist destinations, supported by its cultural heritage, natural attractions, hospitality industry, and tourism infrastructure. The tourism sector contributed significantly to national income, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. However, the military coup carried out by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) on 22 May 2014 altered Thailand's international image. The declaration of martial law, prolonged political uncertainty, and international criticism generated concerns regarding political stability and public security. Several foreign governments subsequently issued travel advisories, contributing to declining tourist arrivals and weakening international confidence in Thailand as a destination.

Rather than treating tourism recovery solely as an economic priority, the administration of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha incorporated tourism into a broader effort to reconstruct Thailand's international image. Through coordinated initiatives involving the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), local governments, and private-sector stakeholders, the government

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introduced policies aimed at restoring confidence in Thailand's safety, accessibility, service quality, and destination competitiveness. These initiatives indicate that tourism was employed not simply to revive visitor numbers but also to communicate narratives of political stability, institutional capability, national resilience, and openness to international audiences.

Theoretically, this study employs Simon Anholt's Nation Branding framework as the principal analytical lens. Anholt (2007; 2013) conceptualises nation branding not merely as the promotion of a country, but as a strategic process linking public policy, institutional performance, and communication in the formation of international reputation. The framework consists of three interrelated dimensions: strategy, which refers to long-term national objectives and positioning; substance, which concerns concrete policy implementation and institutional performance; and symbolic actions, which comprise visible initiatives that communicate national identity and governmental commitment to international audiences. In this study, soft power and public diplomacy are used as complementary perspectives: soft power explains the role of attraction in generating international influence, while public diplomacy explains how states engage foreign publics to cultivate favourable perceptions. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how tourism policy can function simultaneously as substantive governance and strategic international communication.

Although Thailand's tourism sector has attracted considerable scholarly attention, existing studies have primarily examined tourism from the perspectives of destination marketing, economic development, tourism competitiveness, or public administration. Research concerning the 2014 military coup has likewise focused predominantly on democratic regression, civil-military relations, constitutional politics, and domestic political legitimacy. Comparatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how tourism policy functioned as an instrument of nation branding and public diplomacy following the political crisis. Consequently, the intersection between tourism governance, international reputation, and foreign policy remains insufficiently explored within International Relations scholarship.

This study addresses this gap by analysing how the Prayuth Chan-o-cha administration utilised tourism policy as a nation branding strategy to reconstruct Thailand's international image between 2014 and 2018. Drawing upon Anholt's Nation Branding framework and the complementary perspectives of soft power and public diplomacy, the article examines how strategic planning, policy implementation, and symbolic initiatives interacted to restore international confidence after the 2014 military coup. By conceptualising tourism as an instrument of post-crisis diplomacy rather than solely an economic development policy, this study contributes to the literature on nation branding, public diplomacy, and the role of domestic governance in shaping international reputation.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design with a descriptive-analytical approach to examine how the Prayuth Chan-o-cha administration utilized tourism policy as a nation branding strategy following the 2014 military coup. The study focuses on the period 2014-2018, when the Thai government sought to restore international confidence while revitalizing the tourism sector. Data were collected through qualitative document analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official government documents, the National Tourism Development Plan (2012-2016), policy statements, reports from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and annual reports of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, international organization reports, and reputable media sources concerning Thailand's tourism governance, political developments, nation branding, public diplomacy, and soft power.

The collected data were analysed using qualitative content analysis based on Anholt's (2013) Nation Branding framework. The analysis classified tourism policies implemented during 2014–2018 into three dimensions: strategy, referring to long-term policy direction and branding objectives; substance, referring

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to concrete policy implementation and institutional performance; and symbolic actions, referring to visible initiatives aimed at influencing international perceptions. The findings were subsequently interpreted through the complementary perspectives of soft power and public diplomacy. Data triangulation was also applied by comparing official documents, academic literature, international reports, and tourism statistics to identify consistent patterns and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

DISCUSSION

Tourism Policy as a Nation Branding Strategy after the 2014 Military Coup

The military coup of 22 May 2014 represented a critical turning point for Thailand's international reputation. Beyond triggering domestic political transformation, the seizure of power by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) generated negative perceptions among international audiences regarding political stability, democratic governance, and public security. These developments were accompanied by travel advisories issued by numerous countries, which reduced foreign tourist arrivals and threatened one of Thailand's most significant sources of national income. Consequently, restoring confidence among international visitors became not only an economic priority but also a diplomatic necessity. From an International Relations perspective, the Thai government's response illustrates how domestic public policy may simultaneously function as an instrument of external image management. Rather than relying exclusively on diplomatic communication, the Prayuth administration incorporated tourism policy into broader efforts to reconstruct Thailand's international reputation. Tourism therefore became a vehicle through which the government projected narratives of stability, security, resilience, and openness to the international community. According to Anholt (2013), effective nation branding requires the integration of three mutually reinforcing dimensions: strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. Applying this framework demonstrates that Thailand's post-coup tourism recovery was not limited to promotional campaigns but involved coordinated policy implementation supported by institutional reforms and internationally visible initiatives.

Strategy: Repositioning Thailand's International Tourism Image

The strategic dimension of nation branding concerns the formulation of long-term objectives that guide how a country seeks to position itself within the international system. Following the 2014 coup, Thailand did not fundamentally replace its national tourism policy. Instead, the Prayuth administration maintained the existing National Tourism Policy and the National Tourism Development Plan as the principal policy framework while adjusting implementation priorities to respond to the country's deteriorating international image. This policy continuity conveyed an important political message. Maintaining the existing strategic framework signalled institutional stability despite political change. Rather than presenting the coup as a rupture in governance, the government projected an image of administrative consistency capable of sustaining economic development and public services. Such continuity is particularly significant within nation branding because international credibility depends upon the predictability of state institutions rather than solely on changes in political leadership.

The strategic orientation adopted after 2014 focused on several interconnected priorities. First, the government sought to restore international confidence by emphasizing safety and security for foreign visitors. Second, tourism diversification became a national priority through the promotion of cultural tourism, ecotourism, medical tourism, sports tourism, and creative industries. Third, tourism development was increasingly linked with regional economic integration through ASEAN Connectivity, allowing Thailand to reposition itself as the principal tourism gateway within mainland Southeast Asia. These strategic priorities illustrate that Thailand's tourism policy extended beyond destination marketing. Instead, tourism became integrated into broader national development objectives encompassing economic competitiveness, regional leadership, infrastructure modernization, and international reputation

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management. Such integration reflects Anholt's argument that successful nation branding requires coherent national strategy rather than isolated promotional activities.

Substance: Policy Implementation as Evidence of National Credibility

Anholt argues that branding messages acquire legitimacy only when supported by substantive policy implementation. Accordingly, Thailand's nation branding strategy relied upon tangible government actions intended to reinforce the country's image as a safe, accessible, and high-quality tourism destination. One important aspect of policy implementation involved the modernization of tourism infrastructure. Investments were directed towards transportation networks, tourism facilities, accessibility standards, and logistical systems to improve visitor experiences and enhance international competitiveness. Infrastructure development also strengthened regional connectivity by facilitating cross-border tourism within ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion, thereby positioning Thailand as a regional transportation and tourism hub. Another significant initiative involved destination revitalisation and environmental sustainability. Rather than maximizing tourist arrivals without limitation, the government increasingly recognised that long-term competitiveness depended upon preserving natural resources. The temporary closure of Maya Bay for ecological rehabilitation illustrates this policy shift.

Although the closure reduced short-term tourism revenue, it demonstrated governmental commitment to sustainable tourism governance and environmental conservation. From a nation branding perspective, this policy communicated responsible governance and strengthened Thailand's international reputation as a destination capable of balancing economic growth with environmental protection. The government also expanded tourism accessibility through the development of facilities for elderly visitors and persons with disabilities. Such initiatives reflected changing international tourism standards by promoting inclusive tourism and universal accessibility. Beyond improving service quality, these policies projected values of inclusiveness, equality, and social responsibility that increasingly shape international perceptions of destination quality. Collectively, these substantive policies reinforced Thailand's branding narrative by demonstrating that government commitments were supported by measurable institutional action. Consequently, international confidence was rebuilt not merely through communication campaigns but through policy performance capable of generating observable improvements in tourism governance.

Symbolic Actions: Tourism Promotion as Public Diplomacy

The third dimension of Anholt's nation branding framework concerns symbolic actions, namely highly visible initiatives that communicate a state's identity and strategic intentions to international audiences. Unlike conventional promotional campaigns, symbolic actions derive their effectiveness from the interaction between public communication and credible policy implementation. In Thailand's post-coup context, symbolic initiatives were designed to reassure foreign governments, international media, and prospective tourists that the country had regained political stability and remained an attractive destination despite continuing international criticism of the military government. One of the earliest symbolic initiatives was the establishment of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Intelligence Center (TIC). Rather than functioning solely as an information service, the centre represented an institutional mechanism for crisis communication. Through the provision of real-time travel information, security updates, tourism statistics, and coordinated communication with tourism stakeholders, the TIC reduced information asymmetry between the Thai government and international audiences.

In situations of political uncertainty, transparent information management constitutes an essential component of public diplomacy because it enables governments to influence international perceptions by demonstrating responsiveness, accountability, and administrative competence. From a public diplomacy perspective, the establishment of the TIC illustrates the transition from reactive crisis management toward proactive reputation management. Rather than denying the existence of political instability, the Thai government sought to demonstrate its capacity to manage risks effectively and ensure visitor safety. This

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approach reflects Melissen's (2005) argument that contemporary public diplomacy increasingly relies on sustained communication with foreign publics rather than traditional government-to-government interaction.

Thailand also employed cultural diplomacy as an integral component of its nation branding strategy. Initiatives such as the Thailand International Film Destination Festival (TIFDF) promoted the country not only as a tourist destination but also as an international production hub for the global creative industry. By encouraging international filmmakers to produce films in Thailand, the government expanded the country's visibility beyond conventional tourism marketing and embedded Thailand within global cultural networks. Such initiatives contribute to long-term image formation because cinematic representation influences how international audiences imagine foreign places, cultures, and societies. The organisation of the Creative Thailand 2016: Think Big exhibition further demonstrates the integration of tourism promotion with Thailand's broader national development agenda. The exhibition highlighted innovation, entrepreneurship, creative industries, and cultural heritage under the national development vision of Thailand 4.0. Consequently, tourism promotion became intertwined with narratives of technological advancement, economic modernisation, and national competitiveness. Rather than promoting Thailand exclusively through beaches and cultural attractions, the government projected an image of a modern economy capable of innovation while preserving its cultural identity.

Another significant symbolic initiative involved strengthening regional tourism cooperation through ASEAN Connectivity. Instead of promoting Thailand as an isolated destination, the government collaborated with neighbouring countries to develop multi-destination tourism routes connecting Thailand with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. These initiatives positioned Thailand as the principal tourism gateway to mainland Southeast Asia while simultaneously reinforcing ASEAN regional integration. From an International Relations perspective, ASEAN Connectivity illustrates that nation branding may extend beyond unilateral image promotion. By embedding Thailand within regional tourism networks, the government simultaneously strengthened its regional leadership, enhanced economic interdependence, and projected itself as a constructive regional actor. This strategy corresponds with the concept of cooperative public diplomacy, whereby states enhance international reputation through regional collaboration rather than unilateral communication campaigns.

The government's decision to temporarily close Maya Bay for ecological rehabilitation also functioned as a symbolic action with significant international implications. Although the closure generated short-term economic costs, it communicated Thailand's commitment to environmental sustainability and responsible tourism governance. International media widely reported the rehabilitation programme, transforming what might have been interpreted as a tourism restriction into evidence of environmental responsibility. Such policy decisions strengthened Thailand's reputation among environmentally conscious international audiences while reinforcing global norms of sustainable tourism management. Collectively, these symbolic initiatives demonstrate that Thailand's post-coup tourism strategy extended well beyond destination marketing.

Tourism became an instrument of strategic communication through which the government projected narratives of political normalcy, institutional competence, cultural richness, environmental responsibility, and regional cooperation. The interaction between these symbolic initiatives and substantive policy implementation strengthened the credibility of Thailand's nation branding efforts, illustrating Anholt's proposition that national reputation cannot be constructed solely through promotional messages but must be supported by coherent government performance. More broadly, Thailand's experience suggests that tourism policy can serve as an effective instrument of soft power in the aftermath of domestic political crises. Rather than attempting to alter international perceptions through diplomatic rhetoric alone, the government utilised tourism governance to generate tangible experiences capable of reshaping foreign audiences' understanding of the country. This finding reinforces the argument that tourism constitutes an

increasingly important dimension of public diplomacy and international political communication in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Prayuth Chan-o-cha administration employed tourism policy not merely as an instrument of economic recovery but as a strategic mechanism for reconstructing Thailand's international image following the 2014 military coup. Applying Simon Anholt's Nation Branding framework reveals that Thailand's post-coup tourism strategy was built upon the complementary interaction of strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. Policy continuity through the National Tourism Development Plan provided a long-term strategic direction, while investments in tourism infrastructure, destination revitalization, environmental conservation, accessibility, and regional connectivity translated branding objectives into tangible policy outcomes. These efforts were reinforced by highly visible initiatives—including international tourism campaigns, the Tourism Authority of Thailand Intelligence Center, creative industry programmes, and ASEAN tourism cooperation—which projected narratives of political stability, openness, and sustainable development to international audiences.

The findings reinforce Anholt's argument that successful nation branding depends not on promotional campaigns alone but on the consistency between strategic vision, credible policy implementation, and effective international communication. In Thailand's case, tourism functioned as a diplomatic instrument through which the government sought to restore international confidence, rebuild national credibility, and mitigate the reputational consequences of domestic political instability. This suggests that tourism governance can extend beyond destination management to become an integral component of post-crisis reputation management and foreign policy. The Thai case therefore illustrates how domestic policy implementation can shape external perceptions, highlighting the increasingly blurred boundaries between domestic governance and foreign policy in the management of state reputation. For states confronting reputational challenges arising from political crises or other sources of instability, tourism recovery should be integrated into a broader strategy that combines institutional reform, strategic communication, sustainable development, and regional cooperation. International confidence is more likely to be restored when branding initiatives are supported by credible governance and demonstrable policy performance rather than promotional messaging alone.

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