

Rape, prostitution, extortion, murder. These are words you might not associate with golf, but as the global popularity of the game increases, more and more of the world's worst dictatorships and brutal regimes want in on the act – and the money. They are prepared to pay top-dollar to attract the best designers and players, knowing that endorsements all but guarantee success. Up until now, most have remained quietly apolitical, but is it time that golf took a stand? BY TODD PITOCK.

Turf wars

Golf course projects – like this Gary Player design in Bulgaria – are now caught in the middle of managing environmental concerns as well as social issues in the areas in which they are built.

In the mid-1990s, a group of developers cast their gaze upon the 7,000 islands that form the South Pacific nation of The Philippines searching for a place to build a golf resort. Golf course development had thrived under then-president Fidel Ramos, an enthusiastic player who saw the game as an integral part of tourism, and when the developers located a place called Hacienda Looc, a pristine coastal village whose wide plain separated pastoral hills, they thought they'd hit pay dirt.

The plains could be flooded to create a yacht marina. A luxury beach resort would include residential subdivisions. The surrounding hills would be fashioned into four championship courses. Greg Norman and Jack Nicklaus were on board. Hacienda Looc would be the next hot spot. Everyone loved the plans.

Everyone, that is, who didn't already live in Hacienda Looc.

No one had bothered to ask the 7,000 farmers, fishermen and villagers who faced eviction from ancestral lands in what the project's critics say amounted to a nefarious land grab orchestrated by corrupt officials and unscrupulous developers.

"People were worried they'd lose their livelihood from the land," says Jen Schradie, who produced and co-directed, along with Matt DeVries, a documentary about the fight over Hacienda Looc called "The Golf War". "But what jobs? The good jobs would go to people who spoke English and had a certain [socio-economic] background."

Other jobs would be menial, and the villagers, who had been self-sufficient for generations, risked winding up scavenging for work elsewhere in a country where the minimum wage was \$5 a day. They knew from the experience of other villages that some of their daughters could wind up in the country's rampant sex trade.

Hacienda Looc residents organised themselves, first rebuffing bulldozers by forming human chains. Eventually they formed an organisation called "Break Free" and mounted legal challenges.

Then things got ugly. The government sent in military and police, and the developers hired their own para-military personnel whom villagers say harassed and assaulted them. Then, in two separate incidents, three of Break Free's leaders were shot dead. Two shooters, the developer's private guards, were arrested, then released without charges being filed. No one was accused in the third killing. The events engendered outrage and threats of retaliation from a guerrilla movement called the New People's Army.

As the stakes and the embarrassment heightened, the plans were scuttled, and for more than a decade residents have continued to fight off developers in Philippine courts.

Climate change

Hacienda Looc is an example of how far out-of-bounds things can go as golf grows ever more global. For developers and designers on the prowl for prestigious and lucrative projects, such situations raise questions of their own responsibility to be informed about matters in places they're doing business.

"We've become acutely conscious of potential political issues," says John Strawn, chief executive officer of Robert Trent Jones II, LLC. "As with any company, you have to find a way to balance economic benefits against the potential costs of having exploited labour work or some other human rights issue on your project."

The basic issues aren't new – property rights are on a checklist with concerns of environmentalists, local conflicts, and human rights records of dubious regimes, among others. What is new are certain dynamics. The green movement has become formidable, and it has often cast golf in a villainous role. The faltering American golf scene, with more courses closing than opening in each of the past two years, is pushing designers to take on projects in places that a generation ago would have been remote and unlikely golf venues. Kazakhstan, anyone?

The business climate has to some extent changed, too. At one time, designers could afford to take the position that issues were outside of their purview. They were hired to do a job and had neither control of nor responsibility for anything beyond that. Now, a Davos-infused lexicon of ideas about corporate social responsibility and sustainable practices are part of the global business outlook. For the golf establishment, fair ways and greens can now as easily refer to their ethical practices and environmental activists as to golf course features they're hired to design.

"The scrutiny is intensifying," says Josh Calder, a futurist with Social Technologies, a Washington DC-based research and consulting firm. "If 20 years ago a village was bulldozed in Nigeria we'd have to be specialty analysts even to hear of it. Today it could be on YouTube that evening. The transparency and speed with which information is spread has increased vastly. The bottom line is, if you're going to be part of business enterprises in the developing world you can't get away from the politics of social issues."

And then there is the matter of reputation in a world where image, if not everything, counts for a lot. Designers like Norman, Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer aren't just golf-course builders. They're also brand names whose "signatures" add value to real estate, move fashion off retailers' racks and products from shelves – financial fiefdoms fuelled in large part by the public's good opinion.

"A celebrity golfer is a brand and whatever they do will affect that brand," Calder says. "If they get involved in



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the wrong project, someone will want to, say, attach Nigerian human rights violations to the golfer’s brand name as it were, whether it’s fair or not.”

In 2007, following Burma’s brutal suppression of monks leading democracy protests, an activist in Britain pointed a finger at Gary Player over a golf course project that Player’s company, Black Knight International, had designed in Burma in 2002. Player had no active relationship in the junta-ruled country also known as Myanmar.

Black Knight did, however, have a joint venture going with the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund in South Africa, with whom it split proceeds from a tournament, the Nelson Mandela Invitational hosted by Gary Player. Professing outrage at Player’s business with Burma, the fund broke off the relationship. The tournament was cancelled. (Subsequently it was replaced by the Gary Player Invitational Tournament.) Moreover, “Mandela snubs Player” went out on headlines and crawlers around the world.

“It hurt,” says Marc Player, Gary’s son and Black Knight’s chief executive officer. “It hurt financially around our

businesses interests. The asset of that tournament was worth \$10 million. That was gone. The Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund share was \$5 million. That’s gone. They got hurt, too. It hurt my dad’s reputation in South Africa and around the world. It hurt a lot.”

Part of the sting, Player says, is that the facts had been mischaracterised. “For two years [the fund] wanted an increase in their share of the proceeds, and this became their excuse to get out of the relationship,” he says. “We’d concluded our business in Burma in 2002 at a time when Aun San Sui Kyi wasn’t under house arrest and the country appeared to be moving toward democracy. Five years later, all of this comes up and we haven’t had any relationship since then. In 2007 we couldn’t have been any clearer that we thought what was going on there was an atrocity.”

Mandela, Player says, privately apologised to his father, who also received a sympathetic e-mail from Archbishop Desmond Tutu that’s referenced on Player’s website.

Player’s flogging, though, didn’t escape others’ attention. For the most part designers have eluded criticism,

which has come from marginal sources, such as a group called the Global Anti-Golf Movement, whose manifesto is posted online. Still, given the success of the Burma democracy advocates in drawing attention to the issue, could the power of celebrity become a new weapon of choice?

“I got a chill when I read about Gary,” says Strawn, RTJ’s CEO.

“Honestly, I’ve never thought about it before,” says veteran designer Tom Fazio. “Now I’d have questions about human rights and the politics of a region.”

Robert Trent Jones Jr has been politically active even outside golf at least since the 1980s when he became involved, to the point of receiving death threats, in the movement to overthrow Philippine strongman Ferdinand Marcos. He serves on the board of Refugees International, a Washington DC-based group. Jones says he has seen golf development’s darker side. “In Indonesia I remember a man hanged himself. Suharto was forcing his whole village out, and they were powerless to stop it, so he hanged himself.”

Even so, Jones says, “if India and China are growing and transforming

their societies, there are going to be winners and losers within those societies, and it's not our job to sort that out."

Barbara Hanley, who formerly consulted on golf-course design business issues and lectured on the topic at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, says that designers tend not to be paying enough attention to broader or long-term issues surrounding their handiwork.

"They have a moral responsibility, but in the real business world I can't imagine one of the marquee designers turning down a job because he didn't like the politics or the human rights record of some regime," Hanley says. "Social issues just are not on their radar. They come in and every piece of land is the greatest, most unique land they've ever seen, and when things get complicated their cheques have already been cashed and they've moved on. I've sat in on so many of these meetings and I felt like I'd better duck for all the b.s. that was flying around the room."

Taking a stand?

Schradie, the filmmaker, questions how much things have really changed for people in communities in places like Hacienda Looc, and she worries that golf and political establishments have a better grasp of how to manage their images than of the impact on communities that bear the brunt of golf's globalisation.

"A lot of people who are affected by the development wouldn't know what YouTube is," Schradie says. "They don't speak English. They don't know journalists and filmmakers. They may not even know what lawyers are. The developers will get them to sign contracts they don't understand, and then they'll tell you they've talked to the villagers and that the villagers are happy for jobs and the new opportunity, and then you go to the villagers and you discover that they're not OK with it at all, that they're being forced out and don't know what to do."

Marc Player says the Burma debacle caused considerable soul-searching. "Before, I would have said that we

design golf courses for a fee and that I'm apolitical," he says. "But this incident made us scratch our heads and ask, 'Where do we stand on these issues?' Should we develop a course where the developer evicted people who were living there? Do you design if you're going to screw up the environment? Do you design if the place that's hiring you had a bad human rights record? It's a changing landscape, and I think we've got to stand for something."

managing director of Troon Golf Australasia, saw up-close the aftermath of golf course construction in developing nations. The company manages courses but doesn't develop them, so Michelsen has had a chance to see the backlash that designers and developers didn't stick around for, including seeing golf course workers run off courses by machete and club-wielding villagers. He says that anyone who isn't paying attention to social issues imperils their reputation



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RTJ's Strawn says he'd like to see the golf establishment define ethical standards. "I'd love to see a checklist of sustainable, human rights-appropriate standards that we could say we subscribe to, and our clients would agree to," he says. "Can we get there as an industry? I don't know. We can aspire to it, and it's a fair thing for people to ask of us."

During two decades working in golf's emerging markets in Asia, Kurt Michelsen, senior vice president and

– and therefore their financial health. Ultimately it's smart business, and if they don't hold themselves to account, their clients and the general public may.

"In 2009 I don't think you can still ignore social issues," Michelsen says. "You can no longer afford to risk your reputation, and if the communities where you're working aren't seeing a benefit, you're going to spend a lot of time dealing with the fall-out, and ultimately the project just isn't going to work." □