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Informal betting in Myanmar

Against the odds

Oct 8th 2012, 22:15 by T.-F. J. | YANGON

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FOR the past five decades, the best predictor of a return on investment in Myanmar has been the number of stars on the shoulder of the investor or his friends. For the rankless and unconnected there was stagnation—or worse. Even today, with reforms sweeping the country, any opportunity to improve one’s lot seems as addictive as the amphetamine sold in the streets of Yangon, the commercial capital. The Burmese indulge in informal betting to the tune of an estimated \$5-10m a day.

The most popular lottery is *nhit-lone* (two digit or “2D”). The winning numbers are generated by the Thai Stock Exchange: the first digit before the decimal marker of its main index and the last digit of the total value of shares traded. Grocers, shopkeepers and businessmen double as bookies and offer bets for different times of the day. If a better’s numbers come up, she (most players are women) gets \$80 for each \$1 wagered. But in the long run, addicts are likely to lose 20% of their ante: the expected value of a \$1 bet is only 80 cents.

Consulting an astrologer, a monk or a palmist can improve the odds, at least subjectively. Sometimes, however, these tell clients to go for more risk. Sitting under a tree near Yangon’s Sule Pagoda, one palmist counselled your correspondent to shun *nhit-lone* and play *thone-lone* (three-digit or “3D”) instead. It is a higher-stake bet, favoured by men. The winning numbers are the last three digits of the bimonthly Thai state lottery. The odds are lower, but if your number comes up, \$1 turns into \$550.

The Thai numbers follow a pattern, the palmist says. But he has to make do without his time-tested chart, since it could be found by the police which have been going after his like recently. Illegal gambling is punishable with two years in the clink. Bookies risks three years.

Myanmar also boasts a monthly state lottery, called Aung Bar Lay. For the last round on September 30th some 30m tickets were on sale (in shops like the one pictured). Their Naing, the lottery’s director, expects to take in 3.2 billion kyat (\$4m). He would have a lottery every day, but the law does not permit it—which is fortunate. A \$1 bet can turn into \$175,000, but the odds are much worse than with any of the informal lotteries: the expected value of a \$1 bet is only 44 cents. Just like the country as a whole, its state lottery needs reform.

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