Winston Dookeran


Winston Dookeran has been an important political figure in Trinidad and Tobago. The governor of that country’s Central Bank between 1997 and 2002, he again served as the country’s minister of finance and then minister of foreign affairs between 2010 and 2015, the year he retired from politics. *Crisis and Promise in the Caribbean* mixes together many of the numerous papers, presentations, and political speeches he authored during his active political career. This merging does not always work: some of the chapters are disjointed, with one document leaving off and another starting up. Sections of some chapters are dated and no longer germane, even as others speak directly to current Caribbean concerns. Notwithstanding these anomalies and numerous editing errors (typos galore, confusing footnotes), the book’s message is clear: the Caribbean has not adjusted enough to the new global order, and it must do so to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the region’s people.

Dookeran takes to task two of the region’s institutional bedrocks—its Westminster political system and CARICOM. With regard to the former, he argues that because of the population’s small size, the electoral system imported from Great Britain provides inadequate oversight of the executive branch of government. This is because each elected member of Parliament is required to act in multiple roles, as constituency representative; legislator; parliamentary committee member; holder of a ministerial portfolio; cabinet member; and cabinet subcommittee member. With all of these responsibilities individuals become overburdened, setting them up for “failure in one or more of these roles to the detriment of our development.” As he puts it, “the strict Westminster system may work in countries which have very large numbers of parliamentarians, [but] it does not work” for nations the size of those in the Caribbean (p. 37).

In its place, Dookeran advocates instituting a system he calls “fair voting.” With it, voters would cast two votes—one for a party and one for a constituency representative. The majority party’s leader would become the prime minister and would choose his or her cabinet, but no parliament member could serve in that capacity. Dookeran argues that this system would produce “a better separation of the powers of the executive from the legislature” as well as making it possible for “cabinet members [to] focus exclusively on their ministerial roles” (p. 38).

Much of the rest of the book addresses the problem of regional economic development. Dookeran believes that CARICOM’s structure prevents the countries of the Caribbean from taking advantage of the opportunities provided
by globalization. He writes that with CARICOM, “the exercise of sovereignty has posed a constant challenge.” Beyond that, he believes that CARICOM’s purpose—to promote intraregional trade—“no longer [is] the most important pivot of the integration process” (p. 153). Instead, he calls for a collaborative role among government, business, and civil society throughout the region in public-private partnerships. Dookeran describes what he is seeking as “convergence,” the creating of a “new economic space where there is partnership, not just across the Caribbean Sea space, but also between the public and private sector” (p. 201). His hope is that this process of convergence would ultimately result in the inclusion of all of the Caribbean economies, in a bloc that would include 40 million people. With this, Caribbean nations would be able to implement lessons learned from East Asia’s successes in economic development, where governments and the private sector collaborate to achieve economic transformation.

Both of Dookeran’s proposals—for fair elections and convergence—are well thought out and attractive. If they were to be implemented, the region could benefit both from the deepening of democracy that would result from electoral reform, and the accelerated rate of economic growth that convergence would produce. But it is disappointing that Dookeran is completely silent on the question of what would be required to produce a politics that successfully promotes either. Because of that absence, the worry is that his suggestions will be relegated to the category of good but unrealistic ideas.

The lesson to be learned from CARICOM’s limited success is that a project aimed at region-wide reform must emerge at the national level. The hopes invested in CARICOM were disappointed because nowhere did a political consensus support the partial loss of sovereignty that economic integration necessitated. My conjecture is that region-wide changes such as those proposed by Dookeran will occur only if they are initiated in one of the larger states—Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, or Barbados—and then spread elsewhere. If either fair elections or convergence were successfully adopted in one of those countries, that achievement would provide a model that others could emulate. Failing that, it is unlikely that Dookeran’s interesting ideas will be implemented.

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