

Nishith Desai discusses the future of democracy to netocracy with the Iceland President

A round table was organized by Nishith Desai Associates, jointly with O.P. Jindal Global University, on April 6, 2013 in New Delhi around the question of how the internet and its application are redefining the democratic practice and processes.

The President of the Republic of Iceland, Mr. Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, discussed with Nishith Desai, Founder and Managing Partner of Nishith Desai Associates, on the theme 'From Democracy to Netocracy: Changing Dimensions of National and Transnational Governance,' along with several other leaders including Mr. Sam Pitroda (Advisor to the Prime Minister of India on Public Information Infrastructure & Innovations), Mr. Naveen Jindal (Member of Parliament and Chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University), Professor C. Raj Kumar (Vice Chancellor, O.P. Jindal Global University), Mr. Gurcharan Das (noted author and columnist), Professor R. Sudarshan (Dean, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy), Professor Sreeram Chaulia (Dean, Jindal School of International Affairs), and a number of other distinguished panelists and IT entrepreneurs.

Pratibha Jain, Partner and Head of the Delhi office of Nishith Desai Associates, moderated the discussion and opened with her remarks that "the political establishment also is at the very center of the debate in terms of its engagement and control of the internet. Access is also a major issue in a country like India. The use of the internet in India as a feedback or instrumentation tool for the democratic process would be tremendously controversial and perhaps even unfeasible. The challenge of 'access' in India is far greater an issue than a country like Iceland where the issue of access to the internet is perhaps almost not an issue at all."

From the onset of the round table discussion the common theme was about welcoming and preparing for the era of more and more public involvement in key policy issues such as democratic governance, corruption, education, public health, and many other issues, via Internet-enabled technologies.

Mr. Nishith Desai observed that "the Internet has brought humanity closer and we have begun to evolve as a planetary society. This essentially means that the future of engagements among nations and people will depend upon our ability to use and harness technology. The Arab Spring upheavals in the Middle East are showing how the Internet has become an indispensable ally of activists and organizers at the domestic as well as the transnational levels."

The Iceland president Mr. Grimsson called for a new model of e-governance where rulers must "surrender to the people" and allow democracy to be strengthened through the internet. He stressed the need for nations and leaders to become familiar with the changing role of technology and its ability to influence public policy and the aspirations of the people; arguing that the future of human kind would significantly depend upon our ability to understand and appreciate this change brought out by the revolutionary developments harnessed by technology. Sharing experiences of how Iceland recently rewrote its Constitution through social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, President Grimsson added that India and China, with fast growing internet penetration and vast populations of young people, will be the two most important global drivers of the agenda of participatory democracy through information technology.

Mr. Pitroda argued that the role of the government should be limited to creating the “information highways” and IT infrastructure, which would enable ordinary citizens of India to bring their voices to the policymaking processes.

Mr. Jindal mentioned that the speed with which the Internet was being used to transmit ideas and opinions meant that rulers couldn’t take the ruled for granted anymore.

Professor Raj Kumar noted that “while internet and information technology will have profound implications for the future, the concept of nation state will remain relevant as there is a need to establish new institutions both at the domestic and international levels to govern these changes and developments.”

The dominant factor is that the internet is changing the paradigm of communications within and between societies, thereby impacting the political establishment. Governments are at the very center of the debate in terms of how to maximize the benefits of the internet for the welfare of their citizenry.

Media links on event:

Times of India, April 8, 2013: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-08/internet/38372080_1_new-model-internet-penetration-sam-pitroda

Hill Post, April 7, 2013: http://hillpost.in/2013/04/07/let-net-strengthen-democracy-iceland-president/65892/science-and-technology/technology/hp_bureau

Prokerala News, April 7, 2013: <http://www.prokerala.com/news/articles/a370822.html>

The Sentinel, April 7, 2013: <http://www.sentinelassam.com/mainnews/story.php?sec=1&subsec=0&id=155284&dtP=2013-04-11&ppr=1#155284>