

Invoking Obama, young parliamentarians call for change in India

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While the youth vote in the United States carried Barack Obama to victory in this month's presidential elections, young Indian parliamentarians speaking at the World Economic Forum's 24th India Economic Summit, held in partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), called on their countrymen to pursue the same spirit of change. "From our young sportsmen, our young businessmen, our young politicians," said Rahul Bajaj, Chairman, Bajaj Auto; Member of Parliament, India, hopefully we are going to have more than one Barack Obama!"

New leadership and new ideas are desperately needed to address critical challenges faced by India. First among these, said Deepender Singh Hooda, Member of Parliament, India, is "the resurgence of divisions based on caste, religion and region." Moreover, Hooda pointed out that, while India has enjoyed strong economic growth overall, certain sectors of society have been left behind and rising inequality is increasing class tension. Bihar is the most equal state in India: as states become more prosperous, they become more unequal. The shift from an agriculturally-based economy to services and manufacturing also increases tensions over issues like land rights.

Fundamentally, Hooda held, the Indian political system needs to evolve. "The difficulty that all of us face when we try to bring a change," he said, "is the whole momentum of our system that has been built over successive ages of bureaucracy, which resists change. But believe me, we are trying." Naveen Jindal, Member of Parliament, India; Young Global Leader, agreed: "In a true sense I feel that India is not even a democracy, it's a bureaucracy," and administrators, not politicians, have the power.

Part of reasserting control over governance is asserting a new design for the educational system, which is currently not a topic for political debate in India as much as it is in Western democracies.

Naveen Jindal, Member of Parliament, India and a Young Global Leader, suggested a type of voucher system wherein instead of government schools providing subsidized education, students' families would receive the sum directly and be given the freedom to choose where to send their children. Jindal also called for new initiatives to promote family planning and stem unwieldy population growth. He also called for developing nuclear power sources and hydropower.

Jindal and Hooda both agreed on the need to consolidate national and state elections into five year cycles, and Hooda went a step further, saying that elections at the panchayat levels should be included at the same time. Both agreed that, ideally, the BJP and Congress Parties would put bickering aside and form a unity government to press the business of the people; but both also agreed that it is unlikely. Still, Hooda held out hope: "Politics is the art of the impossible," he said.

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