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Multiple ways of understanding democracy

It means different things to different nations with specific conditions changing their priorities

Special Correspondent

BANGALORE: While there is a widespread aspiration for democracy across the world, the very idea of democracy is shrinking from what was once a "deep moral idea" to a "narrow institutional checklist" on governance, said Yogendra Yadav, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

Speaking at a panel discussion on "Multiple Meanings of Democracy: Citizen Voices from Across the World", he said that while democracy was spreading as the only viable way of governance, the idea of what it means to be democratic may have shrunk. He said that a "wide range of human aspirations" make up the notion of democracy and we need a more democratic way of looking at the variety that marks people's understanding of democracy.

The participants

The panel discussion had representatives from the Arab region, Latin America, East Asia, Eurasia and Africa speaking on dominant trends in the region. They partici-



(From left) Yogendra Yadav, Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi, Robert Mattes, Marta Lagos, and Yun-Han Chu, representatives of Africa, Latin America and East Asia respectively in the Global Barometer Survey, at a panel discussion in Bangalore on Tuesday. — PHOTO: G.P. SAMPATH KUMAR

ated in the Global Barometer Survey, which is an effort to comprehensively measure at a mass level, the current so-

cial, political, and economic atmosphere around the world.

The discussion revealed

how democracy means different things to different cultures and nations with specific conditions changing their

priorities. While the ideas of equity and good governance is central to a large number of people in East Asia, the right to vote and conduct of elections is primary to people in Latin America.

As Marta Lagos, who represented the Latino Barometer, put it, the survey showed how "variety is more striking than similarity" in people's varied definitions of democracy.

Mohammed al-Masri, representing the Arab Barometer, said that the Arab Spring has ushered in a new aspiration for democracy, with social justice, fight against corruption and better economic conditions giving the very notion of democracy a socio-economic flavour in the region. There is an overwhelming mood to reject authoritarianism, though there was also a "substantial minority" favouring Shariah law, he said, as their survey of 12 Arab nations revealed.

The panel discussion was organised by the Centre for Research in Social Science Education of Jain University, Centre for Public Policy, IIM-B, Institute of Contemporary Studies, Bangalore.