

Public trust in democracies fell to new low, says survey

PUBLIC TRUST in governments running the world's democracies has fallen to new lows over their handling of the pandemic and amid a widespread sense of economic pessimism, a global survey has found.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, which for two decades has polled thousands of people on trust in their governments, media, business and NGOs, conversely showed rising scores in several autocratic states, notably China.

It also highlighted that business, thanks to its role developing vaccines and adapting workplace and retail practices, had retained strong levels of trust globally, albeit with reservations about its commitment to social fairness.

"We really have a collapse of trust in democracies," said Richard Edelman, whose Edelman communications group published the survey of over 36,000 respondents in 28 countries interviewed between Nov. 1-24 of last year.

"It all goes back to: 'Do you have a sense of economic confidence?'" he added, noting high levels of concern about job losses linked either to the pandemic or automation.

The biggest losers of public trust over the last year were institutions in Germany, down 7 points to 46, Australia at 53 (-6), the Netherlands at 57 (-6), South Korea at 42 (-5) and the United States at 43 (-5).

By contrast, public trust in institutions in China stood at 83%, up 11 points, 76% in United Arab Emirates (+9) and 66% in Thailand (+5).

The trillions of dollars of stimulus spent by the world's richest nations to support their economies through the pandemic have failed to instill a lasting sense of confidence, the survey suggested.

In Japan, only 15% of people believed they and their families

would be better off in five years' time, with most other democracies ranging around 20-40% on the same question.

But in China nearly two-thirds were optimistic about their economic fortunes and 80% of Indians believed they would be better off in five years.

Mr. Edelman said higher public trust levels in China were linked not just to economic perceptions but also to a greater sense of predictability about Chinese policy, not least on the pandemic.

"I think there is a coherence between what is done and what is said...They have had a better COVID than the US for example."

According to the Reuters pandemic tracker, the United States currently leads the world in the daily average number of new deaths reported, while China has regularly been reporting no new deaths for months as it pursues strict "zero-COVID" policies.

The results of the latest Edelman survey are in tune with its findings in recent years that charted rising disillusionment with capitalism, political leadership and the media.

Concerns about "fake news" were this time at all-time highs, with three-quarters of respondents globally worried about it being "used as a weapon". Among societal fears, climate change was now just behind the loss of employment as a major concern.

The burden of expectation on business leaders remains heavy, with strong majorities saying they bought goods, accepted job offers and invested in businesses according to their beliefs and values.

Around two-fifths, however, also said that business was not doing enough to address climate change, economic inequality and workforce reskilling. — **Reuters**

Menopause strains workforce with some women planning to quit

ALMOST a fifth of the female workforce who are experiencing the menopause are considering leaving their jobs, a survey shows.

The study commissioned by the childcare service Koru Kids showed that most women don't get any support at work for their symptoms, and almost a quarter of them aged are unhappy in their jobs because of it. About 18% are thinking about quitting all together, the survey of 2,000

women between the ages of 45 to 67 showed.

"Women should never be pushed out of the workplace because of their biology," said Rachel Carrell, the founder of Koru Kids. "We need to support older women with flexible working and health support so they don't fall out of the workplace needlessly."

The symptoms caused by menopause and the time leading up to it,

perimenopause, include loss of sleep, mood swings, and flashes. They can be so debilitating that it has a bigger impact on women's careers than anything else except having children.

It also adds to strains on the UK labor market, where job vacancies are going unfilled because of a shortage of qualified staff, increasing wages and concerns about inflation.

Women looking to quit listed pressure along with not being able to work

flexibly and a lack of understanding from management as the key reasons they wanted to leave.

Fully 63% of the women surveyed who were going through menopause said that their employer hadn't introduced any policy to support those struggling with symptoms. An even higher proportion of those who had taken time off because of their symptoms hadn't told their employer the real reason why. — **Bloomberg**

Tonga suffers major damage following volcanic eruption

SYDNEY/WELLINGTON — Tonga's small outer islands suffered extensive damage from a massive volcanic eruption and tsunami, a Tongan diplomat said on Tuesday, raising fears of more deaths and injuries.

"Alarming" images taken by New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) reconnaissance flights showed an entire village destroyed on Mango island and numerous buildings missing on nearby Atata island, said the diplomat, Tonga's deputy head of mission in Australia, Curtis Tu'ihalangie.

"People panic, people run and get injuries," Tu'ihalangie told Reuters. "Possibly there will be more deaths and we just pray that is not the case."

Tonga police told the New Zealand High Commission that the confirmed death toll stood at two but with communications in the South Pacific island nation cut, the true extent of casualties was not clear.

Australia's Minister for the Pacific Zed Seselja said Tongan officials were hoping to evacuate people from the isolated,

low-lying Ha'apai islands group and other outer islands where conditions were "very tough, we understand, with many houses being destroyed in the tsunami."

The United Nations had earlier reported a distress signal was detected in Ha'apai, where Mango is located. The Tongan navy reported the area was hit by waves estimated to be 5-10 meters (15-30 feet) high, said the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Atata and Mango are between about 50 and 70 kms from the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano, which sent tsunami waves across the Pacific Ocean and was heard some 2,300 kms (1,430 miles) away in New Zealand when it erupted on Saturday.

Atata has a population of about 100 people and Mango around 50 people.

"It is very alarming to see the wave possibly went through Atata from one end to the other," said Tu'ihalangie.

The NZDF images, which were posted unofficially on a Facebook site and confirmed by

Tu'ihalangie, also showed tarpaulins being used as shelter on Mango island.

British national Angela Glover, 50, was killed in the tsunami as she tried to rescue the dogs she looked after at a rescue shelter, her brother said, the first known death in the disaster.

CLEARING THE RUNWAY

A thick layer of ash blankets the islands, the New Zealand High Commission said, adding it was working to establish communications with smaller islands "as a matter of priority".

The archipelago's main airport, Fua'amotu International Airport, was not damaged in Saturday's eruption and tsunami but heavy ashfall is preventing full operations, hampering international relief efforts.

The U.N. humanitarian office said Tongan officials had said that clearing the runway would take days as it was being done manually, by Wednesday at the earliest.

People on the western coast of the main island of Tongatapu had been evacuated because of "sig-

nificant damage," OCHA added in an update, while government ministers had broadcast warnings on radio against price gouging amid worries of supply shortages.

The Tongan government is expected to formally request aid from countries including Australia and New Zealand tomorrow. Both antipodean nations have C-130 military aircraft on standby, packed with emergency supplies.

"The priority now will be to get supplies to Tonga and the biggest constraint on that at the moment ... is the airport. There is still a significant amount of ash," Seselja said. Tonga is a kingdom of 176 islands, of which 36 are inhabited, with a population of 104,494 people.

The archipelago has remained largely cut off from the world since the eruption which cut its main undersea communications cable.

Subcom, a US based private company contracted to repair various subsea cables in the Asia-Pacific, said it was working with Tonga Cable Ltd. to repair the cable that runs from Tonga to Fiji. — **Reuters**

ADB,
from SI/1

Women represent a quarter of workers in agriculture, which could be a low estimate due to the work being seen as an extension of their household tasks. This "invisibility" then leads to unequal access to land ownership and credit.

"Gender equality in climate financing has been uneven across climate-related sectors — well-integrated in agriculture and water but poorly addressed in the infrastructure and energy sectors," the ADB said.

Elections,
from SI/1

Mr. Aquino, like his parents, came from pedigreed stock — landed, aristocratic families that have long been part of the ruling elite. His campaign was based on a legacy far greater than his own.

Aside from having the first female Philippine president for a mother, his father Benigno Jr. was the country's greatest democracy champion before he was assassinated in 1983 presumably by agents of the dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos.

"Name recognition doesn't correlate with competence," Capital Economics said. "A lack of policy-making experience in leaders (plus high levels of corruption) has contributed to the economy's poor performance over recent decades."

"Foreign investors and other countries with ties to the Philippines or have an interest there have often looked closely at political developments in the country as an indicator of stability in other areas like the economy," said Maria Ela L. Atienza, a political science professor at the University of the Philippines.

Some critics expect Mr. Marcos to follow in his father's footsteps by reviving cronyism, censorship and military abuse. He will be a step ahead of Mr. Duterte, who revered the dictator and styled his leadership after him.

Aside from corruption, the country's weak political system also prevents leaders from pursuing economic reforms, she said.

"The country has weak political parties and even a popular president cannot always count on allies in both

The bank is looking at lending \$3 billion to the Philippines this year, which will focus on infrastructure and climate change resiliency programs.

About 20 typhoons hit the Philippines every year, causing billions of pesos in damage and displacing thousands of Filipinos. Typhoon Odette caused widespread destruction in Central Visayas and Mindanao in December. — **Jenina P. Ibañez**



A MAN wearing a face mask takes part in a simulation for the 2022 Philippine election at a polling station in Pasay City, Dec. 29, 2021.

Houses of Congress to solidly back up much needed reforms that can improve the economy," Ms. Atienza said in a Viber message.

Mr. Yusingco said none of the candidates have presented a roadmap for their term in the next six years. "Not even a first 100 days plan."

He noted that only two candidates have campaign websites. "Hopefully, when the campaign period officially begins next month, all the candidates will have websites with details of their programs."

Few presidential candidates have real policy experience and achievements, said Robin Michael U. Garcia, a political economy professor at the University of Asia and the Pacific.

"Policy-making expertise can be relegated to industry experts and scholars in different fields," he said in a Messenger chat.

He said a presidential candidate should have a vision and plan for a developing country struck by the pandemic. "He should also have empathy for people so he can follow through on his vision."

Investment,
from SI/1

RTLA, reduced the minimum paid-up capital for new foreign retailers to P25 million. The amendments to the Public Service Act would open up more sectors to foreign investments.

"Plus, with the country's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other free trade agreements and more aggressive and targeted investment promotion, the continued push for 'Build, Build, Build' infrastructure program and Ease of Doing Business, we can be more bullish on our investments target for 2022," Mr. Lopez said.

The Senate has yet to concur with the ratification of the RCEP, which took effect in 11 other nations on Jan. 1.

Trade Undersecretary and BoI Managing Head Ceferino S. Rodolfo in a statement said he expects last year's investment leads could still materialize by the second or third quarter of 2022.

He said a "big" telecommunications project worth P155 billion is now up for approval by the Fiscal Incentives Review Board.

Other upcoming projects include a new domestic shipping operator, new operator of charging stations, three new operators of telecommunication infrastructure, a new producer of animal feeds, and a cement manufacturer, Mr. Rodolfo said.

"(We are) zeroing in on projects that will transform the Philippine economy to become more modern such as telecommunications, roads, green energy, health, innovation and digitization, sustainable and competitive heavy industries among others," the BoI said.

Meanwhile, the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) is wooing more investors from the United States to aid the country's economic recovery.

"The Americans remain as one of the top three biggest contributors of investments in the Philippines under PEZA," PEZA Director-General Charito B. Plaza said at a webinar on Tuesday.

Based on PEZA data, US investments in the country as of the third quarter of 2021 had reached P400.67 billion, while exports amounted to \$6.76 billion.

The data also showed that there were 420 American enterprises registered with PEZA, employing 330,906 workers. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

Meralco recognized for outstanding service amid the pandemic

The Manila Electric Company (Meralco) emerged as one of the top companies in the Philippines on service excellence, leveraging both digital and traditional customer channels despite the challenges brought about by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In the recently concluded 2021 ASEAN Enterprise Innovation Awards presented by Asia IoT Business Platform (AIBP), Meralco was recognized for its entry, "Transformation Powered by Technology and Tradition", which showcased the power distributor's programs aimed at enhancing customer experiences through process improvements and digital transformation.

Among Meralco's key customer-centricity initiatives are its Facebook Live Chat, which serves 8,000 transactions per hour; Virtual Customer Assistant, which allows customers to speak with Meralco representatives via video conferencing; and Online Customer Appointment, which enables customers to schedule appointments before visiting Business Centers. All these are geared towards ensuring the safety and convenience of Meralco customers.

In addition, Meralco introduced the Customer Account Number, which is a permanent reference number for all payment transactions.

Another important initiative is the redesigned electricity bill, which aims to help customers better understand and manage their energy consumption. The new bill format is easier to understand as it provides all necessary information such as the customer's 24-month consumption and payment history.

To augment these customer-facing programs, Meralco also arms its crews with a Meter Reading App that helps in optimizing service routes and ensures accurate readings of electricity consumption. Through the Real-Time Payment Validation App, Meralco avoids incidents where the electricity service of customers is disconnected due to the late reflection of customer payments for unsettled bills.

Meralco Chief Commercial Officer and Head of Customer Retail Services Ferdinand O. Geluz said that the Company has always advocated for "service with compassion" as it commits to making customers the priority while adapting to the challenges of the new normal.

"Moving forward, and as signaled by all our efforts behind customer centricity, we will continue pursuing our passion of transforming customer experience across all our transactions and touchpoints," he said.

In 2021, Meralco also unveiled its most advanced Operations Platform and



Telecommunications Integrated Command Center (OPTIC), which manages all information, communication, and technology (ICT) systems across the Company.

The first of its kind among electricity distribution utilities in the country, OPTIC is a state-of-the-art facility that aims to reduce unplanned downtime of critical ICT systems, increase employee productivity, and enhance service delivery to Meralco customers.

Meralco First Vice President and Head of Information Communication Technology and Transformation Rocky D. Bacani said the AIBP recognition affirms the Company's commitment to service innovations that improve customer experience.

"What guided us through our journey is the clear and decisive leadership which accelerated the change and ensured that everyone marches to the same beat as we move forward with our transformation program," he said.

"We also embraced agile delivery allowing us to address customer pain points rapidly through incremental improvements. We knew that beyond technology, the success of our transformation relies heavily on our crews, their ability to embrace change, and their 'malasakit' and sacrifices to go above and beyond in the service of our customers. This Innovation Award is indeed a recognition of Meralco's continued and strong thrust for customer centricity and digital transformation," Bacani added.

Meralco President and Chief Executive Officer Atty. Ray C. Espinosa, meanwhile, said: "Excellent customer service and communication are at the core of what we do in Meralco, and transparency is a value we have long adhered to. To be recognized internationally for campaigns focused on these is a remarkable feat, and a great honor to the many women and men of Meralco who toil relentlessly for the fulfillment of these programs and their objectives, despite adversities brought by the pandemic."