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Quito, February 19 (RHC)-- A report by an investigative news website says the United States and its Latin American allies are trying to steal Ecuador's election from popular socialist candidate Andrés Arauz by disseminating fake news and slanderous remarks to undermine him.

The Grayzone website said in a report that the overwhelming victory of Arauz in the first round of Ecuador's presidential election earlier in the month had prompted the US State Department, the right-wing government of neighboring Colombia, and the Organization of American States (OAS) to mobilize to prevent him from taking office.

Arauz won the first round of the February 7 election with 33 percent of the votes, a full 13 percent greater than the second-place candidate, conservative banker Guillermo Lasso.

Incumbent President Lenin Moreno, whose term in office ends on May 24, broke records of unpopularity and garnered just an eight-percent approval rating.

The investigative news website said the opponents of the socialist candidate were pushing for a vote recount under the supervision of the OAS, while simultaneously launching a smear campaign based on blatant disinformation to link Arauz to a Colombian rebel group in an attempt to disqualify him.

Ecuador's U.S.-backed government of right-wing Moreno is "pushing to persecute me with crude lies... blackmailing and cheating justice," the Grayzone quoted Arauz as saying. The report said Moreno had traveled to Washington, DC just two weeks before the election to meet with top officials from the US government, as well as the coup-sponsoring general secretary of the OAS, Luis Almagro.

The Grayzone said the Moreno administration's top electoral body was "openly conspiring" with the second- and third-place candidates, meeting privately with them, and giving them a massive public platform to conduct a recount of the vote in the specific precincts where they had lost.

Elsewhere in the report, the website also accused the Colombian government of spreading fake news to try to prosecute Ecuador's leading presidential candidate. "Just five days after the February 7 election, amid the recount chaos, Colombia intervened directly in Ecuadorian politics," the report said. "The right-wing government of President Ivan Duque, who has been credibly linked to drug cartels and death squads, sent its chief prosecutor to Ecuador on an official state plane in a desperate attempt to disqualify socialist Andrés Arauz."

The website said the head of Colombia's justice department, Francisco Barbosa, a close ally and personal friend of Duque, amplified fake news stories published by conservative media outlets in his country, claiming that rebels from the so-called National Liberation Army (ELN) had funded Arauz's campaign to the tune of \$80,000.

Colombia's right-wing media outlets also circulated a video purportedly showing ELN guerrillas endorsing the Ecuadorian leftist. The viral video was later dismissed as clearly fabricated.

Ecuador's ex-foreign minister Maria Isabel Salvador, who also served as the nation's ambassador to the OAS, responded to the fake footage and said the Colombian government's absurd attempt to link Arauz to ELN rebels was similar to a tactic used a decade ago against socialist former President Rafael Correa, the most popular politician in the country.

"What are they trying to do? Prevent the victory of hope and truth," Salvador stated. "I remember like it was yesterday the same slander used by the government of Colombia and its media outlets."

Arauz is a staunch follower of Correa, who remains a strong political force in the country despite a graft conviction that sank his hopes of campaigning to become Arauz's deputy. Arauz has promised to return the country to a socialist path after a four-year hiatus under Moreno.

Viewed as highly politicized and with no legal basis, the two-week recount process has the full backing of the U.S. State Department and will be overseen by the OAS, which inspired a military coup targeting Bolivia's democratically-elected socialist government in November last year.

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