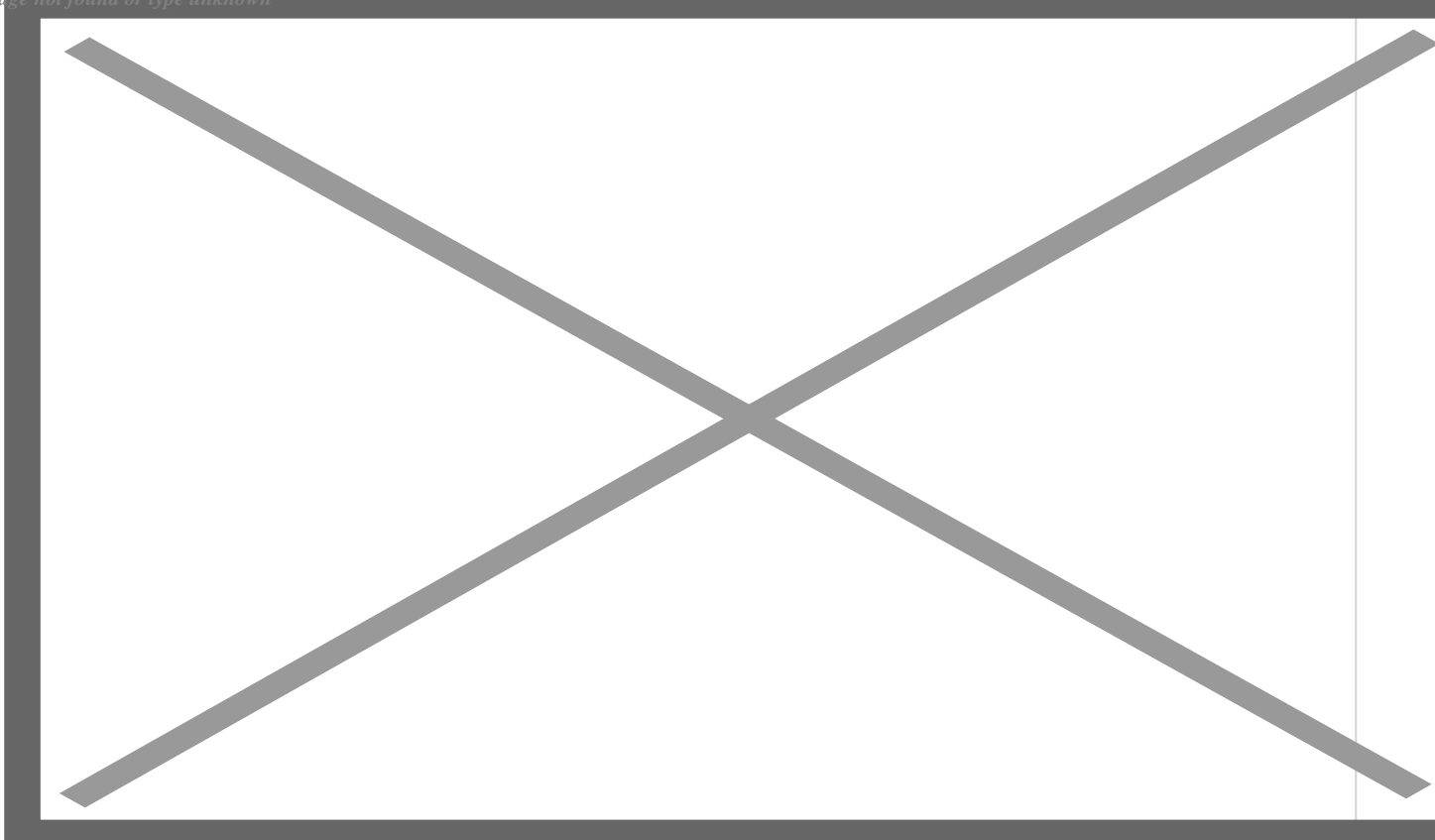


Voting in Ecuador going smoothly with long lines reported

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Lines of voters in Ecuador on Sunday

Quito, February 7 (RHC)-- Polls opened early Sunday for Ecuador's general elections in which a socialist and a former banker are vying for leadership of a nation besieged by deep economic problems. The country's 13.1 million voters will choose a successor to unpopular President Lenin Moreno and the 137 members of the unicameral congress.

Opinion polls show leftist economist Andres Arauz and conservative Guillermo Lasso the clear frontrunners among 16 candidates, with indigenous rights campaigner Yaku Perez in a distant third place. The vote takes place as Latin America is battling a second, deadly wave of COVID-19 which has aggravated Ecuador's economic troubles.

"Today Ecuador wins and democracy wins," National Electoral Council president Diana Atamaint said as she declared the start of election day in a ceremony in Quito as polls opened at 7:00 a.m. (1200 GMT).

Voters arrived at polling stations wearing face masks in a nation where the pandemic has claimed 15,000 lives and infected more than 257,000. Polls suggest many people may stay away for fear of infection.

Front-runners Arauz and Lasso are both predicting victory for their side.

Arauz, 35, represents the Unión por la Esperanza (UNES) coalition of left-wing parties, while businessman Lasso, 65, is from the CREO rightwing movement. Arauz is a protege of two-time socialist president Rafael 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. He has pledged to disburse \$1,000 to a million families during his first month in office, as well as a special tax on the rich.

Running in his third presidential race, free market advocate Lasso has said he would create a million jobs in a year. He will likely stick to the austerity policies adopted by Moreno, who has had to rein in spending in exchange for International Monetary Fund loans to bolster the oil-producing country's faltering dollar-based economy.

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