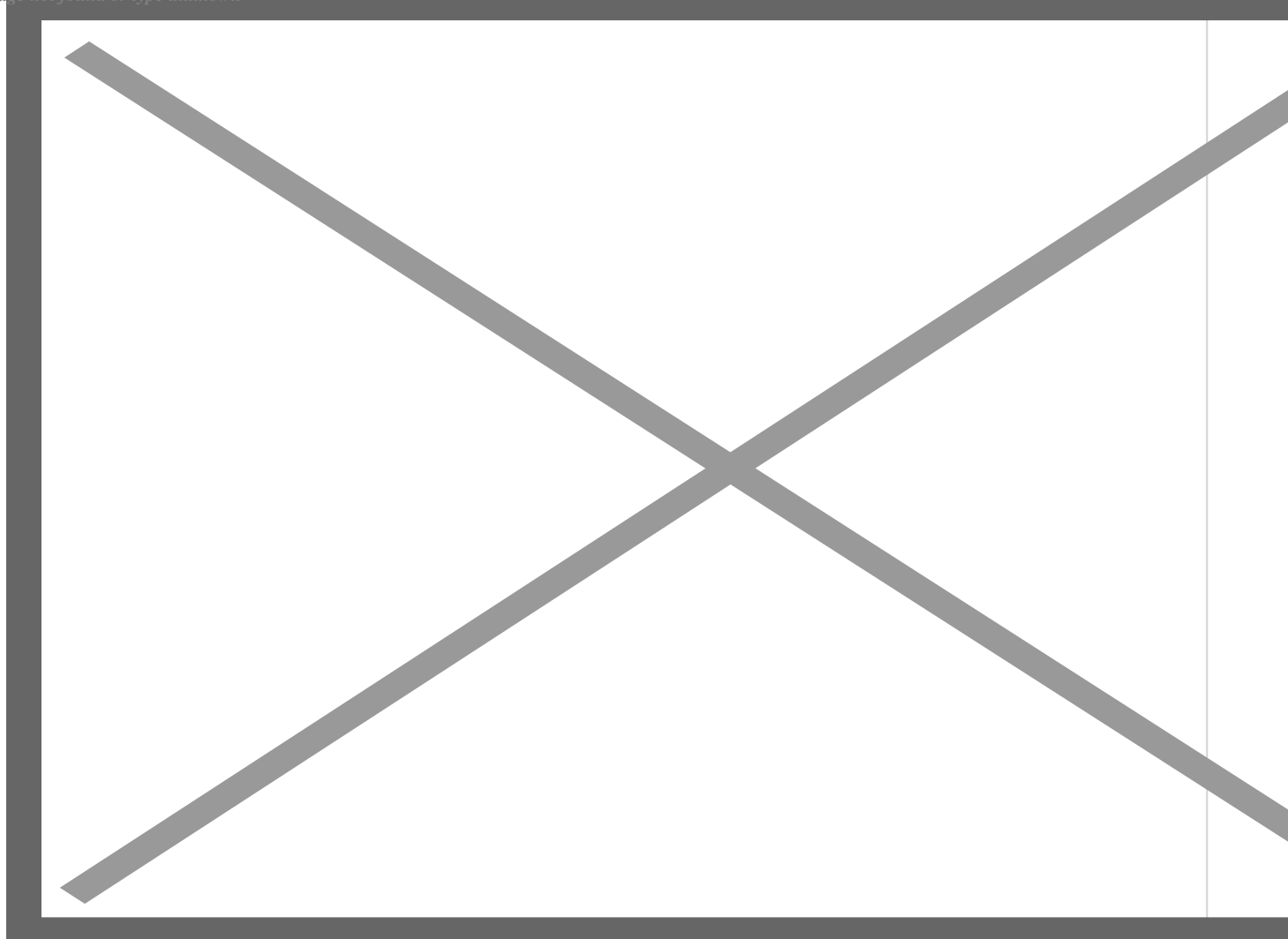


Former president Jose Maria Figueres takes lead in Costa Rican polls

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Jose Maria Figueres, who was president from 1990 to 1994, had 27 percent of the vote with 63 percent of ballots counted (AFP Photo)

San Jose, February 7 (RHC)-- Costa Rica's former president Jose Maria Figueres has led the preliminary vote count in Sunday's presidential election, with former finance minister Rodrigo Chaves set to face him in a run-off.

Figueres was leading comfortably with 27.3 percent of the vote from three-quarters of polling stations, with economist Chaves racing past evangelical Christian Alvarado Munoz with 16.6 percent of the tally. Chaves, a former World Bank official who served as the finance minister for about half a year under outgoing Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado, had been running fourth in recent opinion polls.

Fabricio Alvarado of the neo-Pentecostal New Republic Party and runner-up in the Central American country's 2018 election was running third, garnering support of 15.2 percent voters.

To clinch the first round, a candidate had to get more than 40 percent of votes. The two leading candidates will face each other in a run-off on April 3rd. Chaves, who has refuted accusations he had been censured for sexual harassment earlier in his career, called on Figueres to pursue a dignified discourse in the run-off.

"I have been attacked by few, but very viciously. If I made a mistake, I apologize," he told supporters. Figueres, now is now 67 years-old, was Costa Rica's president from 1994 to 1998 under the centrist National Liberation Party. Alvarado Munoz was a runner-up in the country's 2018 presidential vote. He enjoys the support of the evangelical community, which makes up about 20 percent of the country's 5 million population.

All 57 seats of the national legislative assembly are also up for grabs. Under Costa Rican law, the incumbent center-left President Carlos Alvarado cannot seek a second consecutive term.

During his tenure, Alvarado Quesada, 42, witnessed nationwide civil disobedience after proposing to increase taxes and cut public servant's pensions to ease off the country's budget deficits. He was also a strong proponent of gay marriages in the Christian-majority country.

Costa Ricans have said they want their next leader to tackle corruption and high unemployment rates.

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