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**Ecuador**

# **Battle of the polls - tension between the lefts.**

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**As we write, the Ecuadorian indigenous movement is concentrated in various peaceful demonstrations of thousands of people in front of the provincial delegations of the National Electoral Council. They are demanding that the vote counting process be made transparent and that pertinent doubts regarding a multitude of confusing electoral records be clarified; All this while those responsible for the governing institution of Ecuadorian democracy – mostly nominated by conservative political sectors - have denied and delayed this demand.**

Although initially it appeared that the indigenous candidacy of Yaku Pérez, from the Pachakutik movement, had gained the second biggest vote in the presidential elections on Sunday 7 February and Pérez would emerge as the opponent of *Correísmo* in a second round, the evolution of the vote count reversed this by the afternoon of Tuesday 9 February. Guillermo Lasso, financial magnate and candidate of the elites, became, with just a handful of votes more than Pérez, the opponent of former *Correísta* minister Andrés Arauz in the ballot which will take place on 11 April.

The suspicions of the indigenous movement are based on the fact that the territory that was last in the processing of the votes was the province of Guayas, the historical fiefdom of the Social Christians. It is a coastal right-wing sector allied to Lasso's candidacy and traditionally known for its electoral malpractices. In Guayas, the records that presented inconsistencies went from being 5% in the previous electoral process to being 20% this time. Thus, a significant number of votes remained at the mercy of the decision of the National Electoral Council. [1] According to what indigenous electoral observers said, during the slow processing of votes in recent days, several bags of votes and a significant part of the electoral records with inconsistencies could have been replaced - with the complicity of the members of that body, taken over by delegates from the right – although this has not yet been proven.

## Changing priorities

Beyond this situation and given the very narrow difference in votes between Pérez and Lasso, the truth is that on Sunday 7 February the people of Ecuador broke with the socio-political cleavage that has marked the last 14 years in this country: the polarity between two clearly opposed political factions. On the one hand, that of the former president, now exiled in Belgium, Rafael Correa, and the political-partisan structure that he leads and, on the other, that of the pro-business right represented by Lassos, at the head of the CREO party.

Despite the electoral slogan “In a single round” with which the favourite candidate, Arauz, hoped to avoid a ballot, his party barely obtained 3 million votes (32.6% of valid votes cast). Lasso and the indigenous candidate Pérez obtained around 1,800,000 votes each (between 19.7 and 19.5% of the vote). In fourth place was Xavier Hervas, a young businessman unknown until this campaign, who ran for the social liberal party Izquierda Democrática (ID) and obtained about 1 and a half million votes (15.7 percent). The result of the other 12 candidacies that disputed the presidency was marginal.

## Andrés Arauz, candidate of Correísmo

The opposition of anti-extractivism versus developmentalism and new versus traditional politics was thus expressed in a scenario that initially appeared dominated by the confrontation between Correa's supporters and detractors. This

breach materialized in what was achieved by Pachakutik and ID, an old party on the political scene that has decayed in recent years. To understand this phenomenon, it must be recognised that the candidates of both forces connected in their campaign with segments of the population that no longer felt represented by traditional politics. Beyond his success in the highland and Amazonian territories, Pérez achieved a particular impact among urban youth through an environmental message “in defence of Pachamama”, while Hervas presented himself as the leader of renovation. Both defended, in addition, the right to abortion due to rape against the other candidates, who chose to oppose legalizing it or did not directly address the issue.

Pachakutik made up for its rivals' criticism of the shortcomings of the economic plan it presented during the campaign – even less transformative than that presented by *Correísmo* - by emerging as the depository of the political capital accumulated in the 2019 indigenous uprising against the IMF and the government of Lenín Moreno. In many popular urban sectors, Pérez was seen as part of the “people”, “one of us” and not as a member of the establishment.

The surprising thing about the result obtained by Pachakutik in these elections - the previous polls gave it around 11% of the vote - is in part the effect of the politicization of the pain of many Ecuadorian families after more than 15,000 deaths from Covid-19 in 2020 recorded by official figures; the current accelerated increase in unemployment and job insecurity, suffered by at least 83% of the economically active population, according to the Institute of Statistics and Censuses; the constant loss of purchasing power of the middle and lower middle classes, which is generating strong family indebtedness, and the growth of poverty, which affects almost 38% of Ecuadorians, and of inequality, which increased by 6% last year, according to UNICEF figures. In this context, the indigenous party, founded in 1995 as an electoral front of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie), has thus obtained the best performance in its history at the polls, becoming the second biggest party in the National Assembly.

## Tensions and the danger of division

The criminalization of social protest during the decade of Rafael Correa's government (2007-2017) and the opening of legal proceedings against a good part of the indigenous leadership who exercised their right to resistance in defence of their territories have opened a breach that currently makes understanding between the two political factions impossible. In this context, conflict within the indigenous movement seems inevitable. While Pérez and his entourage, more open to negotiating with the right a common anti-government front, maintain the position of reopening the polls and re-counting the votes in the seven provinces in which they consider that there are incidents - especially in Guayas - the most combative sectors of Conaie, those who led the popular uprising of October 2019, would hardly support Lasso's candidacy in a second round.

At the same time, part of *Correísmo* seems to prioritize the conflict with the indigenous movement, which it accuses of complicity in the dismantling - carried out over the last four years - of the institutional framework installed during the progressive decade. This bitter dispute between the two main options on the left may pave the way to power for a neoliberal right that on Sunday barely won 20% of popular support.

However, just as there are differences within the indigenous movement, not all *Correísmo* shares the confrontational stance against Pachakutik, led by Rafael Correa himself. His former minister and presidential candidate Arauz has been making permanent calls for the formation of a broad front that incorporates not only the indigenous movement, but also the liberal social democratic expression represented by the ID. In fact, in the *Correísta* ranks there is a tension similar to that seen recently in Bolivia between old and new cadres of *progresismo*.

## Predestined for crisis

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At this juncture it is difficult to see how Ecuador's political stalemate will be resolved. A feasible scenario would be for Pérez's claim to open the polls and recount the votes. If the alleged fraud denounced by Pachakutik is proven, the rival to *Correísmo* in the second round would be Pérez himself, who would have to negotiate with the elites and

At this juncture it is difficult to see how Ecuador's political blockade will be resolved. A feasible scenario would be for Pérez's claim to open the polls and recount the votes. If the alleged fraud denounced by Pachakutik is proven, the rival of *Correísmo* in the second round would be Pérez himself, who would have to negotiate with the economic elites in exchange for his vote. This would lead to serious tensions in the indigenous movement.

In the event that Lasso's passage to the ballot is confirmed, Pérez may declare his support for him in the second round in exchange for some second-order ministerial portfolios. It would not be the first time that Pachakutik has made this political mistake. However, once again it seems difficult for such a position - an alliance of the historically forgotten with the country's elites - to be supported by Conaie, the true organizational structure of indigenous power.

Finally, if the vote count demanded by Pérez does not take place, a powerful indigenous mobilization is assured in which episodes such as those of October 2019 could be repeated. A scenario like this, on the other hand, would also mean consequent repression by the state security apparatuses and even the possibility of a Bolivian scenario, with the imposition of a temporary de facto government until a new electoral consultation. Undoubtedly, that would be a propitious occasion for those who wish to impose the package of economic measures demanded by the IMF, which lacks the support of the vast majority of Ecuadorians.

In addition to this political crisis, there is also the announcement by the State Attorney General's Office of an investigation of the finances of the Arauz campaign based on a complaint from Colombia. According to the magazine *Semana*, aligned with conservative interests in that country, the insurgents of the National Liberation Army would have donated about 80,000 dollars to the electoral campaign of *Correísmo*. Despite the fact that the credibility of this publication on issues related to the guerrillas and their alleged links with legal *progresismo* has been severely diminished and the accusation is so far unfounded, it is clear that there is a strong interest for the Ecuadorian government and its allies in the region in achieving the election of a government of conservative tint for the next legislature.

12 February 2021

Translated by International Viewpoint from [Correspondencia de Prensa](#).

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[1] The Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) is controlled by officials sympathetic to Correism and the right wing.