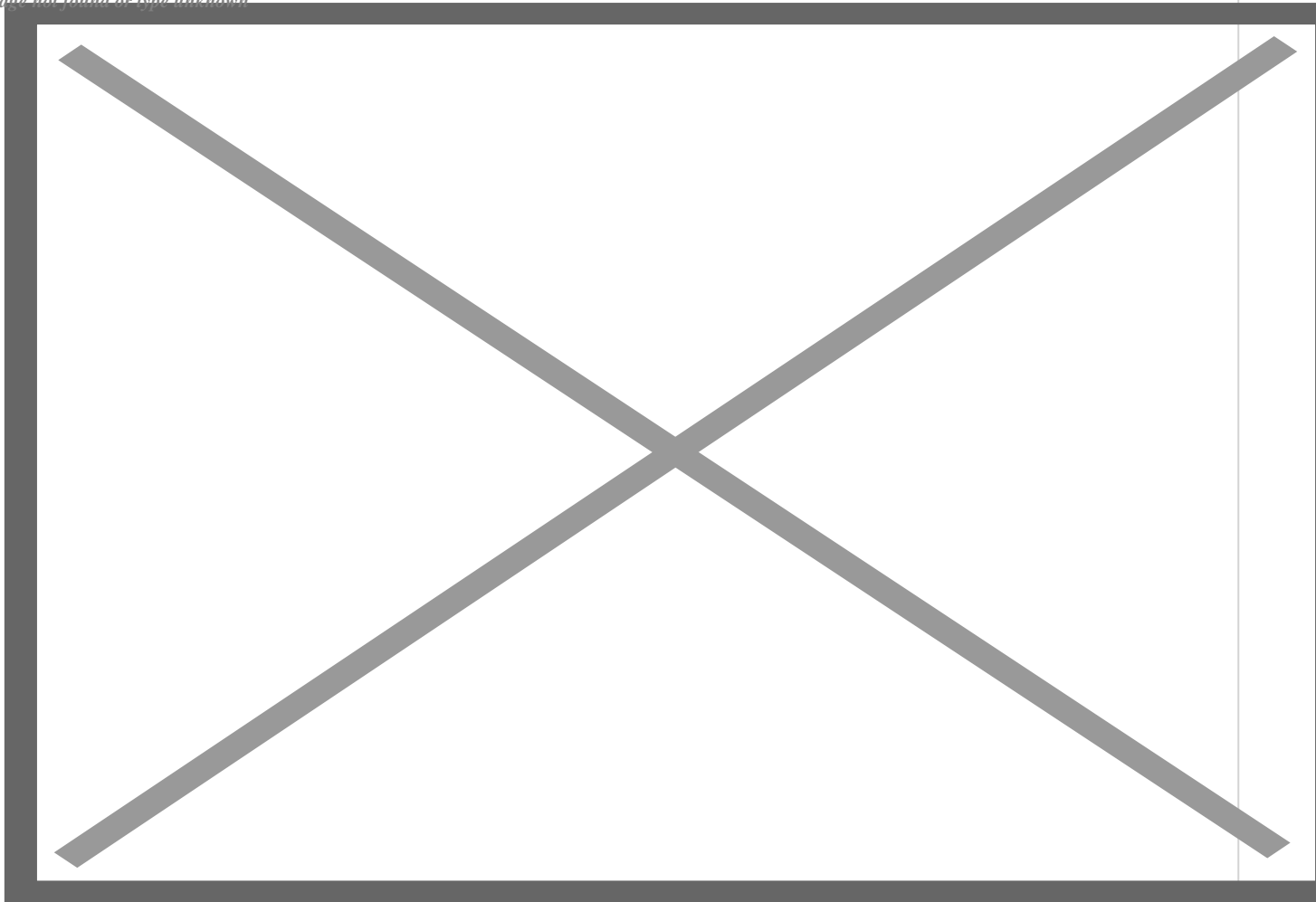


Progressive candidate Bernardo Arevalo leads in poll ahead of Guatemala presidential elections

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Bernardo Arevalo, right, attended a televised debate on August 7 that his rival Sandra Torres declined to participate in [File: Moises Castillo/AP Photo]

Guatemala City, August 17 (RHC)-- A new public opinion poll released days ahead of Guatemala's presidential race indicates former dark-horse candidate Bernardo Arevalo is heading into the vote with a healthy lead.

Arevalo, a candidate for the progressive Movimiento Semilla or Seed Movement, is projected to win by 61 percent, according to a survey published on Wednesday by the research firm CID Gallup.

Such a victory would mark a major upset over early frontrunner Sandra Torres, a former first lady representing the conservative party National Unity of Hope (UNE). Torres and Arevalo are set to go head-to-head in a run-off election on August 20, the culmination of a bumpy presidential race rocked by fears of political interference.

On June 25th, Arevalo surprised the political establishment with an unexpectedly strong finish in the first round of voting. The son of Guatemala's first democratically elected president and a member of Congress himself, Arevalo scored 11.8 percent of the vote, a total only surpassed by Torres at 15.7 percent. No other candidate polled higher than 8 percent.

That result propelled Arevalo and Torres to Sunday's run-off. But in the aftermath of Arevalo's first-round success, rival parties questioned whether the vote tally was accurate, appealing to the court system for a review. Prosecutors claimed that 5,000 signatures used to form the party had been fraudulent.

Presidential candidate Sandra Torres, of the National Unity of Hope (UNE) political party, poses for a selfie during campaign rally ahead of the presidential run-off, in Guatemala City, Guatemala August 5, 2023.

Legal experts quickly denounced the move as a violation of Guatemalan law, which prohibits suspending a party's legal status in the midst of an ongoing election. And the country's Constitutional Court ultimately reversed the lower court's suspension.

But the Attorney General's Office has continued to take action against the Seed Movement, ordering police to raid the party's offices for evidence. Police raids have also targeted the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the country's election authority. The tribunal ultimately requested an injunction against the Attorney General's Office to ensure the election's integrity.

The Guatemalan government has long contended with allegations of corruption, as prosecutors have pursued prominent journalists, judges, lawyers and public accountability advocates on what critics consider trumped-up charges.

The country's attorney general, Maria Consuelo Porras, has herself been sanctioned by the United States "due to her involvement in significant corruption." "During her tenure, Porras repeatedly obstructed and undermined anticorruption investigations in Guatemala to protect her political allies and gain undue political favor," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

Torres, meanwhile, has pushed a platform based on greater government transparency. But she too has faced corruption allegations in the past and was briefly arrested in 2019 on suspicion of campaign finance violations. A judge eventually dismissed the case.

Wednesday's CID Gallup poll found that 52 percent of Guatemalans surveyed were optimistic that the country would improve under Bernardo Arevalo's leadership, whereas only 6 percent said the same of Torres.

A survey from CID Gallup shows Bernardo Arevalo surging ahead of conservative rival Sandra Torres in the lead-up to Sunday's vote

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