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Support for Moderate a Challenge to Iran's Leader



Newsha Tavakolin/Polaris, for The New York Times

Supporters welcomed Mir Hussein Moussavi, a challenger to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on Monday in Tabriz, Iran.

By NAZILA FATH
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TABRIZ, [Iran](#) — The strongest challenger to President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) attracted an unusually large and exuberant crowd of supporters on Monday during a campaign speech in this northwest city near the candidate's birthplace, with only a few weeks before national elections that the incumbent stands a serious chance of losing.

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An estimated 30,000 people attended the rally in Tabriz.

The crowd for the challenger, [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#), was extraordinary not only for its size — an estimated 30,000 — but also because the supporters were not paid, given free food, bused in or ordered by their workplaces to attend, a tactic sometimes used by Mr. Ahmadinejad's campaign.

Many traveled here in private cars and learned about the rally despite new government restrictions on [Facebook](#), the social networking site, which Mr. Moussavi's campaign had been using to spread word of his candidacy among the country's predominantly young electorate. The supporters gave a rousing welcome to Mr. Moussavi, who was born in Khameneh, a small town in the Azerbaijan area of Iran.

"Azerbaijan is my home; Moussavi is my life!" they

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chanted to him in their native dialect, Turkish Azeri.

Mr. Moussavi's appearance here was the first stop of a two-day tour of northwestern Iran, part of his effort to attract the votes of 15 million Turkish speakers around the country, nearly one-third of eligible voters, before the June 12 vote.

"People of Tabriz and Azerbaijan have changed the fate of this country several times," Mr. Moussavi said, referring to several historic revolts against the central government in the region.

"They have always resisted dictatorship."

Mr. Moussavi, [a former prime minister whose moderate views](#) have won him support from other reformers in Iran including former President [Mohammad Khatami](#), has positioned himself as the strongest challenger to Mr. Ahmadinejad, a religious conservative whose backing by the Islamic authorities here has weakened and who is now widely criticized for Iran's economic malaise.

If elected, Mr. Moussavi told supporters here, he would enforce the constitutional law that allows the ethnic languages of different regions to be taught at schools, something Mr. Ahmadinejad has not done. Mr. Moussavi told the voters, "Your vote is crucial in the elections."

His wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who has been at the forefront of his campaign, said in a meeting with women that she favored monogamy — although [polygamy](#) is allowed under the law — and more rights for women. She is the first candidate's wife to campaign since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Ms. Rahnavard, a former dean of a women's university in Tehran and a sculptor, is also seen on Mr. Moussavi's posters holding hands with him, a somewhat daring image in a country where public mingling of the sexes is repressed under strict Islamic social etiquette.

Mr. Moussavi is considered the most serious threat to Mr. Ahmadinejad's re-election among the three challengers. The other two, Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist candidate, and Mohsen Rezaei, a former leader of the [Revolutionary Guards](#), have lagged in voter opinion polls.

Mr. Ahmadinejad still has considerable support among Turkish speakers, especially in poor rural villages. Many low-income Iranians voted for Mr. Ahmadinejad four years ago because of his pledges to raise their standards of living.

Hassan Nazari, 75, a supporter of Mr. Ahmadinejad in Tabriz, said Monday that he would vote for Mr. Ahmadinejad's re-election because Mr. Nazari's salary had increased nearly five times and the lives of people in rural areas had improved.

All three challengers to Mr. Ahmadinejad say his effort to help the poor is little more than charity and vote buying. They have accused him of handing out loans and money instead of investing in major development projects.

Newspapers in Iran reported that students protested in Tehran after Mr. Ahmadinejad's government distributed 3,000 traveler's checks of \$50 each among the students last week.

Mr. Moussavi's supporters have been chanting "death to the government of potato," referring to Mr. Ahmadinejad's distribution of 400,000 tons of free potatoes around the country.

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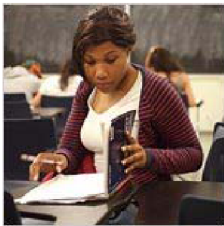


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