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Iran profile

Supreme Leader: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

The Supreme Leader - the highest power in the land - appoints the head of the judiciary, military leaders, the head of radio and TV and Friday prayer leaders. He also confirms the election of Iran's president.

Moreover, the Supreme Leader selects six members of the 12-member Guardian Council, an influential body which has to pass all legislation and which can veto would-be election candidates.

The Leader is chosen by the clerics who make up the Assembly of Experts. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was appointed for life in June 1989, succeeding Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic. He previously served two consecutive terms as president in the 1980s.

He has intervened on behalf of conservatives, coming into conflict with former president Mohammad Khatami and other reformists.

Ayatollah Khamenei endorsed the results of the disputed presidential election of June 2009, which gave a landslide victory and a second term to his ally, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

However, the unprecedented defiance by opposition supporters to his call for an end to street protests against the result is thought to have undermined his authority.

There were further challenges to his authority during the violent protests that followed the death of leading dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Hoseyn Ali Montazeri - a prominent critic of Ayatollah Khamenei - in December 2009.

President: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected as Iran's president in June 2009, amid a bitterly contested poll which led to the most serious internal unrest seen in the country since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Official results from the 12 June election said that Mr Ahmadinejad had won 62.6% of the vote, while his closest challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi, received 33.8%.

Opposition supporters took to the streets amid claims of fraud and vote-rigging. About 20 people were killed and more than 1,000 arrested in the wave of protests that followed, many of whom were abused in custody.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei threw his weight behind Mr Ahmadinejad, and the powerful Guardian Council confirmed the result and ruled out any annulment.

Outspoken style

The ultra-conservative Mr Ahmadinejad served as Tehran's mayor before winning a run-off vote in elections in June 2005,

defeating his rival, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, to become Iran's first non-clerical president for 24 years.

Much of his support came from poorer and more religious sections of Iran's rapidly growing population, particularly in the provinces.

Promising an administration of "peace and moderation", he said his government would press on with Iran's controversial nuclear programme.

His harsh rhetoric has often caused outrage abroad, most notably over Israel and Jews. He has likened Israel to a "cancer" and demanded its replacement with a Palestinian state, while describing the Holocaust as a "myth".

Mr Ahmadinejad has faced mounting criticism at home over his handling of the economy, with hardship on the rise as a result of falling oil prices and the UN sanctions imposed in response to Iran's nuclear programme.

In April 2011, he and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei became engaged in an unusually public stand-off over the resignation of Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi. Since then Ayatollah Khamenei has steadily isolated Mr Ahmadinejad persecuted his allies, ahead of the end of his presidency in 2013.

Born near Tehran in 1956, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a former provincial governor and Revolutionary Guards officer. He was actively involved in the Islamic revolution and was a founding member of the student union that took over the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. He denies being one of the hostage-takers.

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