



Iranian presidential elections 2009

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Iran will hold presidential elections on 12 June 2009, the tenth such elections in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Of the 475 individuals who put themselves forward as potential candidates, only four have been allowed to run for office by the Iranian authorities after a vetting process. The approved candidates include two conservative, or principle-ist, candidates, the incumbent President, Madmoud Ahmadinejad, the former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Moshen Reza'i, and two reformist candidates, Mir Hossein Mousavi Khamene, a former prime minister, and Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of the Iranian parliament. The winning candidate requires more than half the votes cast to avoid a run-off election with the second-placed candidate, scheduled to take place on 19 June.

This note provides an overview of the presidential elections in Iran. It outlines the main candidates and their platforms, analyses the campaign, assesses the fairness of the elections, and discusses their political and constitutional significance within the context of Iran's broader political system.

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1 The elections at a glance

On 12 June 2009, Iranians go to the polls in the tenth presidential elections since the Islamic revolution of 1979. In Iran the president is elected every four years by direct vote and can serve a maximum of two consecutive terms.¹ Iranians who are 18 years of age and older are eligible to vote, meaning that of Iran's 70 million inhabitants the franchise extends to some 42.2 million Iranians. Prospective presidential candidates must meet the criteria set out in the country's constitution according to which candidates must be of Iranian origin; hold Iranian nationality; possess administrative capacity and resourcefulness; have a good past record; display trustworthiness and piety; and demonstrate convinced belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official religion of the country.² In the last presidential elections, held in June 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won with 61% of the vote.³

Two rival camps are competing in the elections: on the one hand, the ruling right-wing Principle-ist camp; on the other, the more moderate elements of the political establishment. The race between the two is tight. In the principle-ist camp, the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, remains the main contender. However, the right wing has not been able to maintain its earlier unity of ranks and another candidate, former Revolutionary Guards commander-in-chief, Mohsen Reza'i has entered the race. The pro-reform camp is similarly divided with reformist support split between two rival nominees: former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karroubi.

Voting behaviour in Iran is difficult to predict, as reflected in previous elections. The return of Ahmadinejad would mean little change in domestic and foreign policy, while the pro-reform candidates are promising greater political tolerance at home, and a more cautious tone in foreign policy. However, no major changes are being predicted in critical matters of foreign affairs such as the nuclear issue or relations with the United States.⁴

Although the contest is closely-fought, President Ahmadinejad is widely expected to win, not least because he appears to have the tacit support of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, even if a formal endorsement has not yet been forthcoming.⁵ Ahmadinejad can draw on the Government's considerable resources as well as on millions of votes from the security forces and the Basji, the morality police. In addition, he commands significant support among the devout, the poor and rural voters. Ahmadinejad's hopes for re-election are further buoyed by the fact that no sitting president has ever lost a race for a second term.

An upset, however, remains a possibility. In the last presidential elections in 2005, Ahmadinejad was considered an outsider, but after coming a close second in the first round of voting, he went on to win the second round convincingly. This year, the election takes place against a backdrop of economic stagnation and diplomatic isolation. Urban Iranians have been particularly critical of what they see as his mismanagement of the economy and his unnecessarily belligerent foreign policy. Ahmadinejad's rivals have launched outspoken attacks on the President's domestic and foreign policies.⁶ Commentators suggest that a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the elections could be the turnout. A low turnout

¹ Former presidents who have already served two consecutive terms can stand for office again after a gap in service.

² [The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), Iran Chamber Society

³ For further details of the 2005 Iranian presidential election, see Library Standard Note, SN/IA/4263, [Iran: Political system and recent elections](#), 6 February 2007

⁴ "Iran's presidential election guide, 12 June 2009", BBC Monitoring, 21 May 2009

⁵ "Will pariah state leader be given the sack? It could be down to potatoes", *The Times*, 29 May 2009

⁶ "How popular is the populist?", *The Economist*, 7 May 2009

– around 26 million of Iran’s 42 million electorate – is expected to help Ahmadinejad, while a high turnout – 30 million and over – is expected to play into the hands of the reformists and particularly Mousavi.⁷

Key dates in the 2009 Iranian presidential elections

- **20 May 2009**
The Guardians Council announced approval of four candidates for the presidency.
- **21 May – 11 June 2009**
The official campaigning period, during which each candidate is allowed to broadcast one film, and one interview on Iranian television and radio, each lasting 30 minutes.
- **12 June 2009**
Election day. Voting takes place in the first round of the elections. Results are usually announced within 24 hours.
- **19 June 2009**
Voting for the second round of the elections if necessary (The Guardians Council then has up to 10 days to confirm the validity, or otherwise, of the vote).

Candidates in the 2009 Iranian presidential elections

Principle-ist candidates:

- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:** The incumbent President
- **Mohsen Reza'i:** former commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)

Reformist candidates:

- **Mir Hossein Mousavi Khamene:** Former Prime Minister
- **Mehdi Karroubi:** Ex-Parliament Speaker

2 The elections in depth

2.1 The candidates

Four candidates have been approved by The Guardians Council – the influential body that reviews and approves legislation and can veto would-be candidates – to stand in the elections.⁸ Two of the candidates are standing on the principle-ist platform, and the other two candidates are from the reformist camp. Around 475 people had registered their nomination for the election, including 42 women, none of whom were authorized to stand.⁹ The approved candidates are as follows:

Principle-ist candidates

- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad - The incumbent President:** Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, 53, was elected the sixth president of the Islamic Republic in June 2005. Standing on a populist platform promising improved economic conditions for the poor and to fight corruption, he finished a close second in the first round of voting before claiming a decisive victory in the second round. In so doing, he became the first non-cleric to win the presidency since the early 1980s. Before becoming president, Ahmadinejad was a traffic and transport engineer, and then served as governor and governor-general in various regions before becoming mayor of Tehran in 2003. Bolstered by high oil prices, Ahmadinejad has spent heavily to consolidate his position among the urban disenfranchised and the rural population. He has not supported the reform of political

⁷ “Incumbent upon you”, *The Economist*, 30 May 2009

⁸ This section draws upon the BBC’s election monitoring paper, “Iran’s presidential election guide, 12 June 2009”, BBC Monitoring, 21 May 2009

⁹ For more information on the candidates, see, “Iran approves main presidential candidates”, BBC News Online, 20 May 2009

institutions and in foreign affairs he has pursued a hard-line policy – insisting on an anti-Western attitude in the region and on uranium enrichment as a part of Tehran's nuclear programme. Domestically, he has been criticised for antagonising the West and for mismanaging the economy which has stagnated, with inflation at 25%. Despite the domestic criticism, he still enjoys the support of the military, the Revolutionary Guards, and the state-owned media. As the front-runner, he is widely expected to win the election.

- **Mohsen Reza'i - Former commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC):** Mohsen Reza'i, 54, was the first of the four presidential contenders to register his candidacy and is the only conservative challenger to Ahmadinejad. He was appointed to serve as the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps at the age of 27 and led the IRGC from 1982 to 1997, including throughout the eight-year Iran-Iraq conflict. In 2002 he was appointed secretary of the Expediency Council, the body which arbitrates on differences between the *Majlis* and its constitutional body, The Guardian Council. Reza'i is seen as a more pragmatic principle-ist, and is critical of Ahmadinejad's management style. He is allied to the powerful centrist politician Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Mr Reza'i ran in the 2005 presidential election but withdrew his candidacy the day before the election. In addition to his service in the Revolutionary Guards, Mr Reza'i holds a PhD in economics. He has promised to reform Iran's struggling economy and to fight poverty, inflation and unemployment.¹⁰

Reformist candidates

- **Mir Hossein Mousavi Khamene - Former prime minister:** Mir Hossein Mousavi, 68, was prime minister from 1981 to 1989 during the Iran-Iraq conflict, and is perceived as a revolutionary veteran. However, since the conflict he has shunned elected office and in 1997 declined to stand in the presidential elections. Nevertheless, he has remained actively engaged in Iranian politics, acting as a presidential adviser between 1989 and 2005 and has been a member of the Expediency Council. Seeking to bridge the gap between principle-ists and reformists, he has the support of several major reformist parties, but has failed to attract the main principle-ist groups. He is putting himself forward as a political conciliator between the warring factions, and stresses the idea of social responsibility and ethics. In terms of foreign policy, he seems to be offering some change on major issues of concern, including backing nuclear talks with the West.¹¹ In particular, he has vowed to end Iran's "extremist" image abroad.¹² However, despite promising negotiations, he remains committed to continuing with Iran's controversial nuclear programme, saying it is for peaceful purposes. Domestically, he has promised to reform the economy. This is, potentially, a strong card for him, having won praise for his handling of the economy as prime minister during the conflict with Iraq. He is regarded as the main challenger to President Ahmadinejad. He is currently the president of the Iranian Academy of Arts.¹³
- **Mehdi Karroubi - Ex-parliament speaker:** Mehdi Karroubi, 72, is a cleric who spent 16 years as a parliamentary deputy, and was *Majlis* Speaker for two terms from 1989 to 1992. He is currently the leader of the National Trust Party and stands at the centre

¹⁰ "Iran's presidential candidates", BBC News Online, 21 May 2009

¹¹ "Iran presidential candidate backs nuclear talks with the West", Haaretz, 29 May 2009

¹² "Iran's presidential candidates", BBC News Online, 21 May 2009

¹³ *Ibid.*

of the political spectrum on a pro-reform platform. He is viewed as a political survivor with a soft and gradualist strategy of reforms, including a more tolerant domestic political climate and a toned-down foreign policy. Internationally, he promises to refrain from unmeasured statements, to promote international dialogue, rationalize policy, and abandon what he regards as costly strategies, such as inflammatory comments on the Holocaust. Domestically, he takes a centrist reformist position, embracing the Islamic dimensions of the political order but at the same time underlining the importance of defending people's liberties.¹⁴ Mr Karroubi stood in the 2005 presidential elections, finishing in third place.

2.2 The campaign

The campaign to date has been characterised by unprecedented acrimony between the candidates. On foreign affairs, Ahmadinejad's rivals have accused him of damaging Iran's national interests and of leading the country into diplomatic isolation. The pro-reform candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, campaigning under the slogan "change", has argued that "the president's speeches have harmed Iran's interests".¹⁵ Referring in particular to Ahmadinejad's public scepticism about the historical reality of the Holocaust, Karroubi says it is of no significance to Iran whether the mass murder of European Jews took place or not. Karroubi argues that, in making the remarks, Ahmadinejad has merely provoked hostility, and has promised, if elected, to seek an improvement in Iran's relationship with the West. The other leading reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, has also publicly attacked Ahmadinejad's adventurism in foreign policy and has called for a "return to rationality". Even Moshen Reza'i, the other conservative candidate in the race, has warned that unless he is removed from office Ahmadinejad would "drag Iran over a cliff".¹⁶

On domestic matters Ahmadinejad's rivals have been equally outspoken. Mousavi promises to release campaigners who have been imprisoned for demanding freedoms and to disband the Guidance Patrols that harass and arrest people accused of immodest behaviour. Mousavi has also pledged to review laws that discriminate against women if he wins the election. In a rally in Tehran on 30 May 2009, he declared that "we should reform laws that are unfair to women".¹⁷ Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who campaigned alongside him, said:

we should prepare the ground for an Iran where women are treated without discrimination [...] We should reform laws that treat women unequally. We should empower women financially, women should be able to choose their professions according to their merits, and Iranian women should be able to reach the highest level of decision making bodies.¹⁸

The other reformist candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, meanwhile, has criticised the sentencing of under-age offenders to death.¹⁹

Criticism of Ahmadinejad has also come from former supporters. On 25 May 2009, it was reported that his daughter's father-in-law, Ahmad Khorshidi, who masterminded his unexpected 2005 election victory and was once part of the president's so-called "brains

¹⁴ "Iran's presidential election guide, 12 June 2009", BBC Monitoring, 21 May 2009

¹⁵ Cited in "How popular is the populist?", *The Economist*, 7 May 2009

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Iran candidate Mousavi backs women's rights", BBC News Online, 30 May 2009

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cited in "How popular is the populist?", *The Economist*, 7 May 2009

trust”, criticised Ahmadinejad as “third rate” and expressed regret for ever campaigning for him. He said, “we started our efforts for his victory between two and three years before the election because we wanted him to win. But now I regret it and feel I have committed a bad error”. Khorshidi also said that he felt positive towards “all the approved candidates except Ahmadinejad”.²⁰

It is widely believed that Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, favours the re-election of Ahmadinejad. In late April 2009, a coalition of 14 groups describing themselves as “principalists” declared their backing for Ahmadinejad in a move interpreted by many as an endorsement by Khamenei.²¹ Khamenei, however, has so far refused to declare his preference between the candidates, at least in public. In the town of Mashhad on 21 March 2009, Khamenei said, “there were some rumours that I supported a special candidate for the presidential elections. But I have one vote, and I would not determine a certain candidate because the people themselves should choose their candidates based upon their own knowledge”.²² Khamenei also publicly rebuked Ahmadinejad for firing a loyalist cleric responsible for managing the pilgrimage to Mecca.

2.3 The electorate

Out of an estimated population of 70 million, Iranian officials have said that 46.2 million people are eligible to vote. Iranians 18 years old and over are allowed to vote. The BBC has reported that the Government recently introduced a parliamentary bill to bring down the voting age to 16 but this was rejected by the Iranian parliament, the *Majlis*. Young people constitute a large part of the electorate. Some 50 per cent of the voters are under 30.²³

Turnout in previous elections has fluctuated, depending on the public mood. According to Ministry of Interior figures, cited by the BBC, the level of turnout in previous elections was as follows:

- 2005 vote - 61 per cent turn out (won by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad)
- 2001 - 67 per cent (Mohammad Khatami)
- 1997 - 80 per cent (Mohammad Khatami)
- 1993 - 51 per cent (Hashemi Rafsanjani)
- 1989 - 55 per cent (Hashemi Rafsanjani)
- 1985 - 55 per cent (Ali Khamene'i)
- 1981 - 47 per cent (Ali Khamene'i)
- 1981 - 64 per cent (Mohammad Ali Raja'i - died in bomb blast)
- 1979 - 67 per cent (Abolhasan Banisadr - deposed by *Majlis*).²⁴

²⁰ “Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is third rate, says daughter's father-in-law”, *The Guardian*, 25 May 2009

²¹ “How popular is the populist?”, *The Economist*, 7 May 2009

²² Cited in “Young Iran's search for a leader”, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2009

²³ According to the CIA World Factbook, the median age of the Iranian population is 27 years (26.8 years for men and 27.2 years for women). [CIA World Factbook](#)

²⁴ “Iran's presidential election guide, 12 June 2009”, BBC Monitoring, 21 May 2009

Both the principle-ist and reformist factions have their own, well-established constituencies, but neither amounts to an outright majority. Therefore, they have to attract the non-committed and the floating voter. In addition, there have always been those who have wavered about whether to vote or not, with many worrying that voting confers legitimacy on the Islamic Republic. However, in this year's election, indications are that political groups which have traditionally boycotted the regime will now participate. Public enthusiasm for the elections is being fostered by the state media as well as the pro-reform newspapers.

2.4 Predictions

It is very difficult to find reliable public opinion polls and most surveys in the media are biased or manipulated to support campaign objectives. However, there is a general pattern that puts either Ahmadinejad or Mousavi in the first two places, and Karroubi and Reza'i as the runners up. Historically, incumbent presidents have always won a second term. Furthermore, for the past four years, principle-ists have won all the parliamentary and local elections.

President Ahmadinejad is, therefore, well positioned. Moreover, the balance of political power is in his favour: the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is seen to be supporting him, while all the main state institutions are controlled by his principle-ist supporters. Reza'i's challenge could either take away votes from Ahmadinejad or prevent protest votes moving from Ahmadinejad to reformist candidates.

According to reformists, a large turnout would play in favour of their camp. They claim that a 65 per cent turnout would give the incumbent president only a 35 per cent chance of returning to office. But they remain concerned about those voters who might not go to the polls. Unlike the vote in 2005, however, there seems to be less talk of an election boycott. Karroubi and Mousavi will be running from a centrist position with the aim of mobilizing the mainstream vote. A large turnout is expected to boost the chances of the reformist candidates in light of the large youth vote, who are said to be more likely to vote for either Mousavi or Karroubi. An article in *The Economist* on 30 May 2009 reported that:

The outcome [of the elections] will be strongly influenced by how many of the 46m registered voters actually turn out. Mr Ahmadinejad can probably bank on collecting 13m voters at least, whatever the turnout. Thus a poor showing, perhaps around 26m voters, would probably benefit the incumbent. In contrast a high turnout, say about 30m, might well do Mr Mousavi a great service.²⁵

2.5 Freedom and fairness of the election

In this election, approximately 475 individuals registered to run as candidates, but the election supervisory body, The Guardian Council, excluded all but four for failing to meet the constitutional requirements. The Council has the legal power to disqualify candidates as it sees fit. Most candidates were unknown individuals who have been accused by the media of registering for the excitement that it would offer. The Guardian Council has also barred a number of middle ranking politicians who are seen to be on the political periphery. Moreover, no women were allowed to stand, as was the case in all of Iran's previous presidential elections.

Elections are "free" in the sense that there will be a choice of candidates to be elected by universal suffrage. However, all candidates have been screened by the Guardian Council, only a handful were approved, and all candidates are establishment figures with long years

²⁵ "Incumbent upon you", *The Economist*, 30 May 2009

of service to the Islamic Republic. No outside figure capable of upsetting the vote is being allowed to run. Such disqualifications often leave large constituencies of the electorate, such as young people, with no favoured candidate.

In general, as Freedom House points out, Iran cannot be considered an electoral democracy. This is primarily because the most powerful figure in the government, the Supreme Leader, is appointed by the Assembly of Experts, a body of 86 clerics who are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote from a government-screened list of candidates. The Supreme Leader then exercises de facto control over appointments to the ministries of Defence, the Interior and Intelligence.²⁶

Moreover, in July 2006, the Ministry of the Interior successfully submitted a bill that proposed involving the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the election vetting process, increasing the voting age to 18, and imposing new qualifications for presidential candidates. Parliament passed the bill in January 2007.

Freedom House has reported that freedom of expression in Iran is also severely limited. The Government controls all television and radio broadcasting. Satellite dishes are illegal, though generally tolerated. However, there have been increasing reports of satellite dish confiscation and steep fines. The Ministry of Culture must approve publication of all books and inspects foreign books prior to domestic distribution. The Press Court has extensive procedural and jurisdictional power to prosecute journalists, editors and publishers for vaguely worded offences such as “insulting Islam” and “damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic”.²⁷ The authorities frequently issue ad hoc gag orders banning media coverage of specific topics and events. Since the inauguration of Ahmadinejad, 570 publications have been shut down. The Ahmadinejad government holds that the duty of the media is to report and support government actions, not comment on them. Thus, the freedom of the media in Iran is severely curtailed, if not forbidden, which, in turn, impacts upon the fairness – or otherwise – of the presidential elections.²⁸

Similarly, according to Freedom House, corruption is pervasive in Iran. The hard-line clerical establishment has grown immensely wealthy through its control of tax-exempt foundations that monopolize many sectors of the economy, such as cement and sugar production. Iran was ranked 131 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.²⁹

2.6 Main issues in the election

Several interconnected political issues will determine the election campaign and its outcome.³⁰ The BBC Election Monitoring guide to the Iranian presidential elections highlights the following issues as central to the campaign:

- **Economy** - Campaign rhetoric and opinion surveys suggest that the economy is the major concern for most Iranians. Global recession, falling oil prices, government overspending, high inflation and high unemployment are serious worries. However,

²⁶ “Country Report: Iran”, Freedom House Report 2008

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Cited in “Country Report: Iran”, Freedom House Report 2008

³⁰ This section draws upon the BBC’s election monitoring paper, “Iran’s presidential election guide, 12 June 2009”, BBC Monitoring, 21 May 2009

given these domestic economic problems, none of the candidates can promise substantially better financial prospects.

- **Class dynamic** - Ahmadinejad won the 2005 election on a platform of "justice" for the ordinary man and war against the corrupt rich. Class consciousness, articulated in a language of war against financial corruption and the mega wealthy, remains central to Ahmadinejad's appeal, and he has therefore tried to consolidate this view among the disenfranchised in the cities and the rural peasantry.
- **Leader** – Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is the most powerful political actor in Iran today. He controls the military, the intelligence agencies and a range of other powerful state-affiliated institutions. Consequently, his support of, or opposition to, a candidate could determine the fate of the elections. Speculation says he favours Ahmadinejad, though this has been denied by sources close to him.
- **Military** - Ahmadinejad has close links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and has favoured them by providing financial backing. The paramilitary Basij volunteers are especially staunch supporters of Ahmadinejad. The IRGC's publication, *Sobhe Sadegh*, regularly publishes articles defending the Government and attacking its critics.³¹ The Guards leaders have said non-military elements of the Basij are allowed to campaign, which has caused concern among reformists.
- **Balance of power** - Currently all the major state institutions are controlled by the right-wing principle-ist camp, including the office of the leader, the judiciary, the executive, the legislature, the military and the state-affiliated conglomerates. The reformist camp, which rose to power during the rule of former President Khatami, has been pushed to the margins, and they have failed since 2005 to win in the elections for the local councils, the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts. However, a strong public swing in their favour could upset this status quo.
- **Civil liberties** - The main ideals of the pro-reform movement – i.e. civil liberties and the rule of law – have not been the main element in their campaign rhetoric, having been overshadowed by the stress on economic issues. However, they remain on the agenda and are considered a significant force in mobilizing activists and the middle class vote.
- **Media reach** – The balance of power in the state-run media, and the press is in favour of the principle-ists, but the pro-reform newspapers and internet sites are highly influential, and there is some factional infighting within the right-wing media. A number of newspapers and websites which could have supported a right-wing candidate other than Ahmadinejad have been closed down or filtered. Persian-language channels broadcasting from outside Iran play a role in shaping public opinion, and in the past have encouraged people to refrain from voting so as not to give legitimacy to the Islamic Republic.
- **United States** - Relations with the US are arguably the most important part of Iranian foreign policy, but little change is envisioned in foreign affairs before the June vote. An opening up of bilateral relations between the two countries could have an impact on campaigning and boost Ahmadinejad's standing as a leader who can deliver, enabling him to rebut accusations that his foreign policies have isolated the country. However,

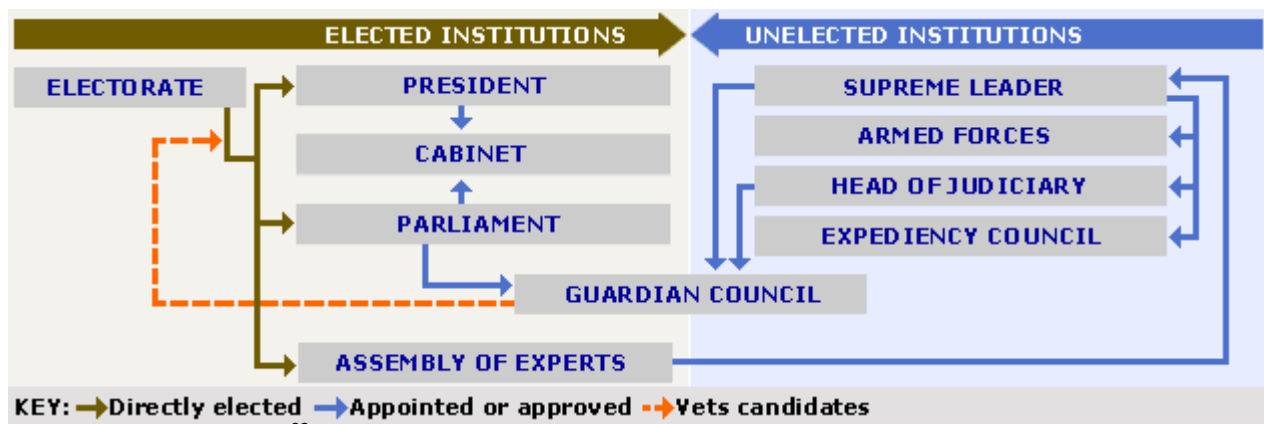
³¹ See www.sobhesadegh.ir. Available in Persian only.

continued tensions with the US could enable Ahmadinejad to play the nationalist card and portray himself as the candidate capable of standing up to Washington.

- **Irregularities** - Elections in Iran are generally seen to reflect public opinion despite charges of irregularities in some elections. Previous complaints have mainly been about the way that people have been mobilized to vote, rather than actual vote rigging. After the 2005 presidential elections, Mehdi Karroubi, the defeated presidential candidate, complained about irregularities.

3 Iran's political system

The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a complex blend of theocratic and democratic government. It is based on the constitution introduced after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which was then amended in 1989.



Source: BBC News Online³²

As can be seen in the diagram above, ultimate religious and political authority is exercised by the Supreme Leader, or *Vali-e-faqih*, who holds the post for life. The current holder, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assumed the role in 1989 following the death of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Supreme Leader is tasked with carrying the burden of leadership in the absence of the Twelfth Imam, or *Muhammad al-Mahdi*. Muslims from the Twelfth School of Shi'a Islam believe *al-Mahdi* is the rightful successor to the Prophet Mohammad and that he has entered an occult state, hidden from humankind, but will return to bring justice and peace.

The Supreme Leader, who is chosen by an 86-member body of clerics called the Assembly of Experts, exercises considerable authority. He appoints the head of the judiciary, military leaders, the head of radio and TV, and Friday prayer leaders. Moreover, he selects six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, an influential body that reviews and approves legislation and that can veto would-be election candidates.

This religious authority overlies a republican constitutional structure. The President acts as chief executive of the government and submits nominees for the cabinet, or Council of Ministers, to the parliament, or *Majlis*, for approval. Presidential candidates are elected by universal suffrage for a four-year term and may serve a maximum of two terms.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly, or *Majlis-e-Shura-e Islami* (the Iranian parliament), exercises legislative power. There are currently 290 seats in the Assembly, increased from

³² "Iran: Who holds the power", BBC News Online

270 for the 2000 elections. There are provisions for the representation of the minority communities of Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. Candidates are screened by the Guardian Council. At the 2004 elections, over 2,000 candidates were reportedly barred from standing, including 80 existing *Majlis* members. Most of the rejected candidates were recognised as being “reformists.” Members serve a four-year term and the next parliamentary elections are due in 2012.

The influential twelve-member Guardian Council comprises six Islamic theologians chosen by the Supreme Leader and six lawyers proposed by the head of the judicial system and approved by the *Majlis*. It encapsulates the roles of a number of different institutions, taking on some of the functions of a constitutional court, an electoral authority and, in some respects, an upper house of parliament as a “house of review”. Its approval is required for all legislation to ensure compliance with Islamic law and the constitution. The six clerical members of the Council alone decide on the question of compatibility with Islam. Rejected laws are passed back to the *Majlis* for correction, and the issue is referred to the Expediency Council, or Council to Determine the Expediency of the Islamic Order, in the event of continued disagreement. In its electoral authority capacity, all candidates for parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as candidates for the Assembly of Experts, must be approved by the Council.

4 Recent elections in Iran

4.1 Elections, 1979 – 2004

In January 1980 Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, who enjoyed support among pro-reform modernist groups, was elected president with around 75 per cent of the vote. Disputes with the Islamists led to his removal from the presidency in mid-1981 and he later fled to France. Fresh elections were held in July 1981 and again in October, after the victorious candidate from the July election was assassinated in a bomb attack. Hojatoleslam Ali Khamenei from the Islamic Republican Party won a resounding victory, with more than 16 million of the 16.8 million votes cast. He was re-elected in August 1985, winning 85.7 per cent of the votes. Almost 50 candidates were rejected by the Council of Guardians, leaving only two challengers to the incumbent.

Khamenei then succeeded Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader on his death in June 1989 and the *Majlis* speaker, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, won the presidential election held in July of that year. There was only one other candidate. According to official figures, Mr Rafsanjani won around 96 per cent of the vote. He had stood on a platform advocating economic reform and a more conciliatory foreign policy towards the West. Constitutional amendments were also passed in a referendum, abolishing the post of prime minister and transferring many of the post’s powers to the president. Elections to the *Majlis* in April and May 1992 further strengthened the hand of the pro-reform camp against the conservatives, with around 70 per cent of the new assembly believed to be made up of reformist deputies.

However, popular disenchantment with state corruption, social injustice, economic mismanagement and the slow pace of reform was reflected in the presidential elections of June 1993, when Mr Rafsanjani won a comparatively low 63 per cent of the vote, despite competing against three supposedly “token” candidates.

A significant shift occurred in May 1997 when the favourite, *Majlis* speaker Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, lost to Sayed Mohammad Khatami, a political moderate who had advocated the need for economic, political and social reforms. The victory for Mr Khatami with 69 per cent of the

vote was seen as an indication of a widespread popular desire for change after years of only incremental reform and political and economic stagnation.

The outcome of the 2000 *Majlis* elections was similarly encouraging for the pro-reform camp, despite the suppression of student demonstrations the year before. Of the 290 seats in parliament, around 200 were won by candidates perceived to be 'liberal' or broadly in favour of reform. Turnout for the election was around 80 per cent.

During early 2001 doubts emerged over whether Mr Khatami would run in the presidential elections on 8 June of that year. Some analysts speculated that he had become disillusioned by the lack of progress during his first term. Observers also noted growing frustration among some of his supporters at the failure to push through more far-reaching reforms. Although there was a notable loosening of restrictions on personal freedom after 1997, key elements of the establishment – such as the security services and the judiciary – remained in the hands of conservative hard-liners. The brief flourishing of a free press, one of the main achievements of the Khatami administration, had also been halted and many liberal newspapers forced to shut down. In the event, he announced his intention to run as a candidate just days before the registration process ended.

The conservatives declined to endorse a prominent candidate for the election, leaving a field comprising Mr Khatami and nine independent conservatives. Mr Khatami emerged with an increased majority of 76.9 per cent on a 67 per cent turnout, his nearest rival Ahmad Tavakoli securing 15.6 per cent.

Parliamentary elections took place in February 2004. Political disputes erupted in the weeks prior to the vote after around 3,600 candidates were rejected by the Council of Guardians, although about one third were reinstated on appeal. A number of reformist candidates decided to boycott the elections and of those that did participate, many fared poorly, particularly in Tehran. After the second round, the conservatives emerged with 195 seats, while the reformists held 40- 50. The remainder went to independents.

4.2 2005 presidential elections

As in 1997, the 2005 presidential elections produced a surprise winner in the form of the ultra-conservative mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Over 1,000 candidates were initially barred from participating, including the most prominent reformist candidate, Moustafa Moin. That decision was later reversed and he was allowed to stand. The favourite was former president Rafsanjani. Although no candidate appeared likely to gain sufficient votes in the first round for a clear victory, attention was focused on who would win second place and secure a place in the run-off. In the event, Mr Rafsanjani won 21 per cent, just ahead of Mr Ahmadinejad on 19.5 per cent. The other conservative candidates won 13.9 per cent (Muhammad Baqir Qalibaf) and 5.9 per cent (Ali Ardeshir Larijani). Of the reformists, the vote was split between Mehdi Karroubi with 17.3 per cent and Mr Moin with 13.8. The other reformist candidate, Mohsen Mehr-Alizadeh, won 4.4 per cent.

In the ensuing second round run-off, Mr Ahmadinejad won 61.7 per cent, against 35.9 for Rafsanjani, making him the first non-cleric to hold the post since the early 1980s. Analysts suggested the result may have owed much to popular uncertainty about Mr Rafsanjani's efforts to win over the reformist camp by promising economic restructuring, greater engagement with the international community and freedom of speech. The surge in support for Mr Ahmadinejad appears to have materialised late in the campaign, as voters from the urban working class and socially conservative parts of the population became attracted by

the simplicity of his message and his stance on social justice and anti-corruption. The result also appeared to reflect a shift away from the traditional 'conservative' versus 'reformist' division within Iranian politics and to signal the emergence of a new strand of Islamic populism.

In 2006, Ahmadinejad's performance as president came in for close scrutiny in Iran, with a number of leading officials and the media criticising his government's handling of the economy and expressing concerns about his outspoken interventions on foreign relations. The local election results from December 2006 and the poor showing for candidates linked to the president appear to suggest that there is a level of popular frustration with the performance of his government.

There were around 250,000 candidates standing at the December 2006 municipal elections, with around 100,000 seats being contested. Precise figures are difficult to gauge, not least because many candidates stood as independents, but it appears that reformist candidates made modest gains, while moderate conservatives won the most support, gaining nearly half the seats on Tehran's city council. Candidates affiliated with Mr Ahmadinejad failed to win seats in a number of cities across Iran and won only three of the 15 seats in Tehran.

Elections were also held for the 86-member Assembly of Experts, with former president Rafsanjani securing the most votes. A number of candidates affiliated to Mr Ahmadinejad failed to win seats, with some observers suggesting that as many as 70 per cent of the new assembly's members were linked to Mr Rafsanjani.

4.3 2008 parliamentary elections

In 2008, parliamentary elections were held in Iran, with the first round on 14 March and the second on 25 April. After the two rounds of voting for the legislature, Iranian conservatives increased their representation as an overall bloc and topped the poll convincingly; conservatives won four times as many seats in the Iranian Parliament as reformers. The results of the 2008 parliamentary elections were taken as an endorsement by the people of Iran of President Ahmadinejad's uncompromising view of Iran's Islamic system, of the nuclear programme, and of Iran's assertive foreign policy and hostility towards the West, particularly the United States. The results were widely interpreted as good news for the Iranian president and bad news for those Western governments hoping for moderates to temper Ahmadinejad's more assertive policies. However, although overall reformists were beaten by conservatives, reformists did make modest gains in the number of parliamentary seats they won. Given the obstacles placed in their way, reformists claimed that these modest gains represented an important success.

Following the elections, Iran's majority conservatives elected Ali Larijani, former top nuclear negotiator, as the speaker of the new parliament. The key aspect of the election was therefore the emergence of two distinct factions within the larger conservative group. These blocs consist of a more radical group, led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and a more pragmatic group, associated with Ali Larijani.

5 News sources and further reading

5.1 Media monitoring

- BBC Election Monitoring: Provides English language translations of reports from a wide spectrum of media sources, including radio, television, internet, and print media. Accessible through the Library's Intranet at:

<http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/EXTERNAL/Online/bbcmon.asp>

5.2 Iranian news sources

- Iran Daily News: <http://www.irannewsdaily.com/>
- Iran Mania Daily News: <http://www.iranmania.com/>
- Islamic Republic News Agency: <http://www4.irna.ir/En/default.aspx?IdLanguage=3>
- Press TV: <http://www.presstv.ir/>

5.3 Articles

Newspapers

- ["Iranian president in TV spat with rival"](#), *Financial Times*, 4 June 2009
- ["Former speaker may split reformist vote"](#), *Financial Times*, 3 June 2009
- ["Arson attack in Iran leaves 5 more dead: Second pre-election incident in border town: President seeks to pin blame on 'foreign enemies'."](#) *The Guardian*, 2 June 2009
- ["Iran vote closer than expected"](#), *Financial Times*, 2 June 2009
- ["Moussavi woos Iran's young voters"](#), *Financial Times*, 1 June 2009
- ["Home-made bomb on board plane raises tension ahead of Iran elections"](#), *The Guardian*, 31 May 2009
- ["Iran hangs three men over mosque bombing"](#), *The Guardian*, 30 May 2009
- ["Young Iran's search for a leader"](#), *The Guardian*, 29 May 2009
- ["Blast at Iranian mosque raises tension in run-up to poll"](#), *The Guardian*, 29 May 2009
- ["Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hands out potatoes to poor to buy presidential votes"](#), *The Times*, 29 May 2009
- ["Gunmen attack Iran president's campaign offices"](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 2009
- ["Miliband downbeat on Iran election"](#), *The Guardian*, 28 May 2009
- ["Tehran U-turn as Facebook ban is lifted"](#), *Financial Times*, 27 May 2009
- ["Miliband: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei must engage with West"](#), *The Times*, 27 May 2009

- [“Iran restores Facebook amid claims of election blackout”](#), *The Guardian*, 27 May 2009
- [“Iran’s elections”](#), Hudson New York, 27 May 2009
- [“Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is third rate, says daughter’s father-in-law”](#), *The Guardian*, 25 May 2009
- [“Iran’s leader tries to silence rivals in the run-up to presidential poll”](#), *The Observer*, 24 May 2009
- [“Iran bans Facebook ahead of elections”](#), *The Guardian*, 24 May 2009
- [“First lady hopeful embodies Iran’s reformist voice”](#), *Financial Times*, 23 May 2009
- [“Poll rivals line up in Iran – and the bets are on Ahmadinejad”](#), *The Times*, 20 May 2009
- [“Iran approves president candidates but bars all women”](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 May 2009
- [“Iran approves main presidential candidates”](#), BBC News Online, 20 May 2009
- [“Spuds-for-votes protest blights Iranian election: Reformist rivals accuse President Ahmadinejad of using potatoes to lure voters”](#), *The Guardian*, 15 May 2009
- [“Will Iran get a female president?”](#), *The Guardian*, 15 May 2009
- [“Facebook sets tone in Iran’s electoral contest”](#), *Financial Times*, 13 May 2009
- [“Facebook becomes early battleground in Iran elections”](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 2009
- [“Iran plans to air US-style TV election debate”](#), *The Guardian*, 13 May 2009
- [“Iran frees Saberi in time for elections”](#), *The Guardian*, 11 May 2009
- [“Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to seek second term”](#), *The Guardian*, 9 May 2009
- [“Ahmadinejad takes to the streets”](#), *Financial Times*, 8 May 2009
- [“Wife joins Iranian presidential candidate on campaign trail”](#), *The Guardian*, 6 May 2009
- [“A futile quest for power”](#), *The Guardian*, 17 March 2009

Journals

- [“Incumbent upon you”](#), *The Economist*, 30 May 2009
- [“The foreign policy factor in Iran’s presidential race”](#), *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 May 2009
- [“How popular is the populist?”](#), *The Economist*, 7 May 2007
- [“Iran’s potato revolution”](#), *Foreign Policy*, May 2009

- “Think again: Talking to Iran”, *Foreign Policy*, February 2009
- Ali Ansari, “Iran under Ahmadinejad: populism and its malcontents”, *International Affairs*, Vol 84, No 4 (2008)
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- “Iran: Ahmadi-Nejad’s tumultuous presidency”, *International Crisis Group*, 6 February 2007

5.4 Library papers

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- Library Standard Note SN/IA/4264, *Iran: Conventional military capabilities*, 22 February 2008
- Library Standard Note SN/IA/4603, *Iran’s relations with the Gulf states*, 30 January 2008
- Library Standard Note SN/IA/4262, *Iran’s nuclear programme: An overview*, 24 September 2007
- Library Standard Note SN/IA/1736, *Iran*, 20 February 2004