

By Alex Shone, UK Defence Forum Research Associate in Residence

On 8th March, Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani, an 80-year-old conservative cleric, was elected as the chairman of Iran's Assembly of Experts. Mahdavi-Kani replaced Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who had headed the Assembly for the previous four years. Yesterday, in the House of Commons, it was asked of the UK Government what their assessment was of Rafsanjani's departure from the Assembly. The answer was that this event was not anticipated to seriously impact the current course of Iran's internal and external policies, though these will remain of great concern.

Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani

Born in 1931 in the village of Kan, near Tehran, he began his education in Tehran and left for Qom to study at a seminary in 1947, aged 16. One of his teachers was Imam Khomeyni (later Ayatollah Khomeyni). He was imprisoned and tortured due to his political activity in the 1970s. Mahdavi-Kani has a history of medical conditions. He has been hospitalised with heart problems three times in 1985, 2001 and 2005.

Iran's Assembly of Experts

There 86 members of the Assembly of Experts and their role is to appoint the Supreme Leader, monitor his performance and remove the Leader from post if he is deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties. The Assembly's members are elected by the public for 8 year terms in a general election. The candidates are carefully vetted before being allowed to stand and the Assembly is dominated by religious conservatives.

Political career

Mahdavi-Kani was among the founding members of the Military Clergy Association, the jame'eh-ye rowhaniyat-e mobarez, (JRM). The Association started in 1977 as an anti-Shah movement and gained power after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

After the Revolution, Mahdavi-Kani was appointed a member of Guardian Council in 1980 and served as Iran's interior minister between 1980 and 1981. He served as acting Prime Minister from September to October 1981, after the assassination of his predecessor, Mohammad Javad Bahonar. Mahdavi-Kani has also served as a member of the Council of the Islamic Revolution Committee and the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution.

In 1984, Mahdavi-Kani became provisional Friday prayer leader for Tehran for two years. In 1997, he was elected to the Expediency Council, and in 1989 Ayatollah Khamene'i appointed him as the Director of Mosques. In 1999, Mahdavi-Kani was elected as secretary-general of the JRM, a position he holds to this day. He is also the chancellor of the Imam Sadeq University in Tehran.

Mahdavi-Kani is a traditional conservative cleric who elects to stay behind the scenes. He is a loyal follower of Ayatollah Khomeyni and has expressed criticism towards President Ahmadinejad. Mahdavi-Kani actually refused to receive the President during the latter's visit to Imam Sadeq University in 2007, though he supported Ahmadinejad's candidacy in the 2009 presidential election.

In memoirs published in 2007, Mahdavi-Kani said that he had always been opposed to the siege of the USA embassy in Tehran in 1979 demanding the extradition of the Shah from the USA to face trial in Iran.