Who’s Who Among World Leaders
Meet some of the key players on the world’s stage.

**NORTH AMERICA**

**United States**

Barack Obama, 49, took office in January 2009 as the 44th President of the United States. He is the first African-American to hold that office.

Obama immediately faced serious challenges. When he took office, the U.S. economy was mired in a severe recession (negative growth in productivity). Obama quickly helped pass a law intended to stimulate the economy. It worked, to an extent: The recession ended officially in June 2009. However, millions of Americans are still out of work. Many people blame the President’s policies for the still-weak economy.

Obama also inherited tough problems overseas. Americans were fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has gradually pulled U.S. combat troops out of Iraq, and plans to turn the country over to full Iraqi control by the end of 2011. Meanwhile, Obama has been sending more troops to Afghanistan, where the situation remains perilous. Many Afghans mistrust the U.S.-backed government, while Islamic radicals known as the Taliban continue to attack U.S. troops.

**Did you know?** For his birthday this past August 4, Obama got to play a basketball game with NBA stars such as Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, and Carmelo Anthony.

**Mexico**

Felipe Calderón (feh-LEE-eh pahl dhoo-ROHNE), 48, became President in 2006 amid controversy over the closest election in Mexico’s history. Opponents accused him of election fraud, and his chief rival refused to concede defeat. A court ruled that he had won the election fairly.

Calderón has made headlines for taking on Mexican criminal drug cartels (organizations). When he sent federal troops to wage a war on the drug trade, the cartels struck back savagely. Violence in Mexico has soared, with more than 28,000 drug-related deaths since Calderón took office.

Critics claim that he has been too aggressive, but Calderón says that continuing the battle against drugs is the only way to make Mexico safe. He has criticized the U.S. for adding to the problem by not curbing the high demand for drugs within its own borders.

In May 2010, Calderón addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress, speaking out against Arizona’s tough new anti-immigration law. He is working to reduce the steady flow of Mexicans crossing the U.S. border by improving economic conditions in his country.

**Did you know?** As a child, Calderón handed out flyers and painted slogans in support of the National Action Party (PAN), co-founded by his father.

**Canada**

Stephen Harper, 51, the leader of Canada’s Conservative Party, was elected Prime Minister in 2006. His victory ended 12 years of Liberal Party rule.

Although Harper is Prime Minister, his Conservative Party holds only 143 of the 308 seats in Parliament. He must work with opposition parties to get legislation passed. Opposition leaders are vocal in their criticism of the Prime Minister.

Harper is no stranger to controversy. In 2008, he suspended Parliament for a month to avoid a no-confidence vote for his handling of the economy. He angered his opposition again in December 2009, by shutting down Parliament for an additional two months.

Canada was in the international spotlight this year for hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic Games and the G8 and G20 economic summits (meetings of world leaders). But the high price tag for hosting the summits—an estimated $1 billion—angered many Canadians. Harper has vowed to work on economic recovery while keeping taxes low and reducing deficits.

**Did you know?** Harper is an avid hockey fan and loves classic rock—especially the Beatles.

**SOUTH AMERICA**

**Venezuela**

Hugo Chávez (OO-goh CHAH-veez), 56, became President in 1999. He leads one of the world’s top oil-exporting countries. Chávez, a former army paratrooper, is a vocal
critic of the U.S. He believes that the U.S. is too powerful, especially in terms of influence over Central America and South America.

Chávez portrays himself as a champion of the poor. However, many people fear that he wants to become a dictator. In 2009, he won a national referendum (vote on an issue) that ended presidential term limits. The change will allow him to continue running for President for as long as he likes. Chávez has fought off several efforts to remove him from power, including a brief coup in 2002.

Did you know? Chávez has a weekly live TV program called Aló Presidente (Hello, President), in which he interviews guests and talks about his political ideas. He even sings and tells jokes.

Colombia

Juan Manuel Santos, 59, became President in August 2010. People have said that Santos was born to be President of Colombia. His family is well-connected politically. Santos is the great-nephew of a former Colombian President. He is also a cousin of the country’s current Vice President.

Santos’s previous service as the country’s defense minister helped make him popular. In that role, he oversaw successful military operations against left-wing rebel groups. Leading a country with strong ties to the U.S., Santos has also pledged to help fight his country’s illegal drug trade. Much of the world’s cocaine is grown and produced in Colombia.

Did you know? Colombian reporters have called Santos “Chucky” because many people say that he looks like the doll in the Child’s Play horror-movie series.

Russia

Dmitry Medvedev, 45, was elected President in March 2008. He is the country’s third elected President since the modern nation of Russia was created after the collapse of the Communist Soviet Union in 1991.

Medvedev succeeded Vladimir Putin, a powerful Russian leader who served two terms as President but was prevented by the constitution from seeking a third consecutive term. Putin, who now serves as Prime Minister of Russia, chose Medvedev as his successor.

Many people believe that Putin remains in control of Russia, and some critics have said that Medvedev is simply keeping the presidential seat warm until Putin can run again in the 2012 election.

But other observers say that Medvedev may be setting a different course from his mentor’s. He has favored greater contact with the West and encouraged foreign investment. After a long chill, he has also improved relations with the U.S., cooperating with President Obama on an arms deal earlier this year.

Since taking office, Medvedev has dealt with military conflict in neighboring Georgia over land that both countries claim. He also faces a long-standing conflict in Chechnya, a region where many people want independence from Russia. Last March, two female Chechen suicide bombers killed 39 people in a Moscow subway. Medvedev also faces great challenges in modernizing his country and dealing with a group of longtime regional leaders who cling to power and resist change.

Did you know? Medvedev loves classic British rock bands. He was thrilled when Deep Purple put on a special performance at the Kremlin in 2008.
**Who’s Who Among World Leaders cont’d**

**ASIA**

**Afghanistan**

Hamid Karzai, 52, has been in power since 2001. That is when the United States and other countries helped overthrow the Taliban, Afghanistan’s previous rulers. The Taliban are a radical Muslim group that gave shelter to Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Karzai learned about politics early: He was born the son of a powerful tribal chief. But he has struggled as President. Critics complain that he is a weak leader who ignores widespread corruption in his government. Many of Afghanistan’s 29 million people still do not view Karzai as their leader. Instead, they turn to tribal chiefs—or to the Taliban.

Karzai’s 2009 re-election was marred by reports of widespread fraud. This angers U.S. leaders, who worry about the immense cost in American lives being spent to prop up his government. The U.S. wants to leave with Afghanistan a stable country. But that is likely to take many years.

**Did you know?** Karzai speaks six languages: Dari, English, French, Hindi, Pashto, and Urdu.

**North Korea**

Kim Jong Il, 69, became North Korea’s leader in 1994. He followed in the footsteps of his father, Kim Il Sung, as dictator of this country, a Communist regime. Despite official stories in the North Korean media lauding the greatness of the “Dear Leader,” North Koreans have little freedom and live in poverty.

From an early age, Kim was groomed to lead the nation. In 1980, the elder Kim announced that his son would succeed him as leader. In 1990, the younger Kim became commander of North Korea’s military. When his father died in 1994, he took power.

Now Kim Jong Il, who is rumored to be ill, seems to be repeating that process. In September he made his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, a four-star general in North Korea’s army. Although still in his 20s, Kim Jong Un appears to be the dictator’s choice for North Korea’s next leader.

North Korea has a long history of strained relations with the West. Tensions have worsened since 2001, when North Korea began building and testing nuclear weapons. Recently, Kim Jong Il seemed willing to resume talks with the U.S. and South Korea on limiting his nuclear program. However, he has started and stopped such talks before.

**Did you know?** Kim Jong Il is a huge movie fan. His favorite flicks are said to include _Friday the 13th_, _Rambo_, _Godzilla_, and all James Bond films except _Die Another Day_, in which North Koreans are the villains.

**OCEANIA**

**Australia**

Julia Gillard, 49, is Australia’s first female Prime Minister. Gillard belongs to the Labor Party. She rose to the post in June 2010, after then–Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stepped down as leader of their party.

Weeks later, Gillard called for a new election to cement her position with voters. But she made a series of missteps on crucial issues. Voters were unhappy with the way Labor handled immigration issues and climate-change policy. That caused support for her to drop sharply.

Gillard had to get help from the Greens, an environmental party, and independents to create a majority in Parliament. As a result, she is expected to focus a lot of attention on climate change.

**Did you know?** Soon after taking office, Gillard announced that she is an atheist (one who does not believe there is a God). But polls showed that this did not hurt her standing with Australian voters.

**AFRICA**

**South Africa**

Jacob Zuma, 68, has been President of South Africa since May 2009. Zuma is a political survivor who overcame many challenges to become President. He has been plagued by corruption charges and other controversies throughout his career.

Born into poverty, Zuma had no formal education. At age 17, he joined the African National Congress (ANC), a banned political party that sought to overthrow South Africa’s all-white government. He served a 10-year prison sentence for opposing the country’s system of apartheid (separation of the races) alongside Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s great black-nationalist leader.

After the system of apartheid collapsed, Zuma rose to Deputy President of South Africa. He later defeated President Thabo Mbeki in a bitter battle to become President of the ANC.

South Africa received economic and image boosts this past summer when it hosted the 2010 World Cup in soccer. But poverty, crime, and unemployment remain high.
More than 1 million civil servants recently went on strike, closing schools and paralyzing hospitals for weeks.

Did you know? Zuma’s middle name, Gedleyihlekisa, is a shortened form of a Zulu sentence that in English means “I won’t keep quiet when someone deceives me with a beautiful smile while he is doing damage to me.”

**Rwanda**

Paul Kagame (kuh-GAH-may), 53, became President of Rwanda in 2000. The former rebel leader is credited with creating peace and stability in a country once torn apart by genocide (mass murder of a particular group of people). But critics doubt his commitment to democracy.

Kagame led the rebel army that ended the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in 1994. Rwanda’s Parliament elected him President in 2000, and he won the country’s first multiparty elections by wide margins in 2003 and 2010.

Economic growth has been robust under his leadership. He is popular for bringing more schools, roads, and even reliable Internet service to Rwanda. But human-rights groups point out that Kagame’s government is becoming increasingly harsh. During the 2010 election, opposition candidates were not allowed to run for office, and an opposition leader and a journalist were killed. The Kagame government denies involvement in the deaths.

Did you know? As a child, Kagame made soccer balls from banana plants and would play with them during his 11-mile walk to school.

**MIDDLE EAST**

**Israel**

Benjamin Netanyahu, 61, was sworn in as Prime Minister in April 2009 for a second time. He previously served in that role from 1996 to 1999. He is the leader of Likud (luh-KOOD), the right-wing party.

Netanyahu was born in Israel but attended high school in Pennsylvania and college at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), two of the most prestigious universities in the U.S. After returning to Israel, he served in the military as captain of an elite commando unit. At age 46, he became the youngest person to serve as Israel’s Prime Minister.

At the urging of the U.S., Netanyahu is participating in peace talks with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The Israelis and Palestinians have a long-standing dispute over land, which often results in violence. Few observers believe that the talks will succeed unless Netanyahu agrees to renew a freeze on the building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank region, which Palestinians see as part of their future country. So far, he has refused to do so.

Critics say that the Conservative wing of his party is avidly opposed to giving more land to the Palestinians. Did you know? Known as “Bibi” throughout Israel today, Netanyahu once used the name Ben Nitay in the U.S. because it was easier for Americans to pronounce.

**Iran**

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (mah-MAO-d uh-MAH-dih-nee-ZHAHD), 54, has been President of Iran since 2005.

He is a controversial leader who often provokes international outrage. In a September speech to the United Nations, he claimed that the U.S. had planned the September 11 terrorist attacks. He has also said that the Holocaust is a myth and has called for Israel to “be wiped off the map.”

In 2009, Ahmadinejad was elected to a second term in a bitterly contested election. Critics called the election a fraud. Hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets in antigovernment protests. But the protests were violently suppressed. The government continues a harsh crackdown against opposition leaders.

Iran is in the process of building nuclear power plants. Officials say that the country needs them to generate electricity. However, the U.S. and other countries fear that Iran plans to use those plants to produce nuclear weapons. This especially alarms Israel, which has threatened to attack Iran over the issue. Such an attack would in turn alarm other countries, because it could trigger a major war.

Did you know? The son of a blacksmith, Ahmadinejad is proud of his humble roots. He frequently wears a cheap windbreaker that he bought at a Tehran bazaar—now nicknamed the “Ahmadinejacket”—which critics make fun of, but supporters also wear in tribute to him.