

ISLAM KARIMOV: THE FIRST PREZIDENT OF INDEPENDENT UZBEKISTAN”

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the life and legacy of Islam Karimov, the first President of independent Uzbekistan (1991–2016), highlighting his pivotal role in shaping the nation’s modern trajectory. From his early education in Samarkand to his rise through key governmental roles, Karimov’s intellectual and practical expertise laid the groundwork for his transformative leadership. Guiding Uzbekistan through its transition from Soviet rule to sovereignty, he implemented the "Uzbek model" of economic reform, fostering gradual market development, industrial diversification, and social welfare. His policies advanced education, healthcare, and cultural preservation, while his foreign policy strengthened Uzbekistan’s global standing through balanced diplomacy and regional cooperation. Karimov’s enduring contributions, including infrastructure projects, interethnic harmony, and a robust national identity, cemented his legacy as a visionary leader committed to Uzbekistan’s stability and prosperity.

Key words: Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan, independence, Uzbek model, economic reform, nation-building, social policy, education, healthcare, foreign policy, cultural revival, stability, Central Asia, leadership, development.

Islam Abduganievich Karimov stands as a monumental figure in the history of Uzbekistan, revered as the founding father of the nation's independence and the architect of its modern development. Born on January 30, 1938, in the ancient city of Samarkand, Karimov's life journey from humble beginnings to the pinnacle of leadership exemplifies dedication, intellect, and unwavering commitment to his homeland. As the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, serving from 1991 until his passing in 2016, he guided the country through the tumultuous transition from Soviet rule to sovereignty, fostering economic growth, social harmony, and international recognition. Under his visionary leadership, Uzbekistan emerged as a stable, prosperous state in Central Asia, with a unique model of development that prioritized national interests and the well-being of its people.

Karimov's presidency was marked by a series of transformative achievements that laid the foundation for Uzbekistan's future. He championed the "Uzbek model" of economic reform, which emphasized gradual transition, strong social policies, and self-reliance, leading to sustained growth and diversification.

His efforts in education, healthcare, and cultural revival not only elevated the quality of life for Uzbeks but also preserved and promoted the rich heritage of the nation. On the global stage, Karimov positioned Uzbekistan as a key player in regional cooperation and peace initiatives. This article explores his life, rise to power, and enduring contributions, highlighting the positive impacts that continue to shape Uzbekistan today.

Islam Karimov's early years were shaped by the challenges of wartime and post-war Uzbekistan, yet they forged a resilient character that would define his future accomplishments. Raised in a modest family of civil servants, he attended Samarkand School No. 21 named after Alexander Pushkin, where he excelled academically and graduated with a gold medal in 1955. His

intellectual curiosity extended beyond the classroom; he immersed himself in history books, exact sciences, chess, modeling, and table tennis, activities that honed his strategic thinking and discipline.

Pursuing higher education, Karimov enrolled at the Central Asian Polytechnic Institute (now Tashkent Technical University), earning a diploma in mechanical engineering in 1960. This technical foundation was complemented by a degree in economics from the Tashkent Institute of National Economy in 1967, where he later defended his thesis in 1973 and became a Candidate of Economic Sciences. Further enhancing his expertise, he graduated from the Institute of National Economy Management in Moscow in 1975 and, in 1994, attained a Doctor of Economic Sciences degree, becoming a full professor of Macroeconomics and a member of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan.

These educational milestones equipped Karimov with a blend of engineering precision and economic insight, skills that proved invaluable in his professional career and later in steering Uzbekistan's development. His academic achievements reflect a lifelong pursuit of knowledge, which he later channeled into national policies promoting education and innovation.

Karimov's professional trajectory began in 1960 at the TASHSELMASH factory, where he quickly rose from assistant foreman to industrial engineer, demonstrating exceptional technical acumen.

In 1961, he transitioned to the Tashkent Aviation Plant named after V.P. Chkalov, advancing to the position of leading design engineer by 1966. This hands-on experience in heavy industry provided him with practical insights into production and innovation, fostering a deep understanding of economic mechanisms.

In 1966, Karimov entered public service at the State Planning Committee of Uzbekistan, progressing through roles such as chief specialist, head of department, and eventually First Deputy Chairman. His ascent continued with appointments as Minister of Finance in 1983, Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1986, and First Secretary of the Kashkadarya Regional Committee of the Communist Party. By 1989, he was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, a role in which he addressed pressing socio-economic issues during a period of national unrest.

Karimov's leadership during this era was pivotal; he initiated reforms like distributing 400,000 hectares of irrigated land to 2.5 million families and enacting the State Language Law, elevating Uzbek to state status.

On March 24, 1990, he was elected the first President of Uzbekistan by the Supreme Council, setting the stage for the nation's independence. His ability to navigate complex political landscapes with wisdom and resolve earned him widespread respect and positioned him as the ideal leader for Uzbekistan's sovereign future.

The declaration of Uzbekistan's independence on August 31, 1991, marked a historic milestone under Karimov's guidance. As the Soviet Union dissolved, he proclaimed state independence and signed the Act on the Foundations of State Independence, transforming Uzbekistan into a sovereign republic. He reorganized the Communist Party into the People's Democratic Party and oversaw the first nationwide presidential elections on December 29, 1991, securing 86% of the vote in a process that also confirmed independence via referendum.

Karimov's nation-building efforts were profound. He spearheaded the drafting of the 1992 Constitution, which incorporated international human rights standards, ensured separation of powers, and declared private property equal to other forms. This foundational document aligned with democratic principles and set Uzbekistan on a path of stability and progress. His personal courage and statesmanly discernment united the nation, fostering an atmosphere of mutual understanding and agreement among diverse ethnic groups.

Over 130 nationalities coexisted peacefully, with education in seven languages and 140 national cultural centers, promoting interethnic harmony as a cornerstone of his policy.

Karimov's economic vision, encapsulated in the "Uzbek model," revolutionized Uzbekistan's economy through five key principles: prioritizing economy over politics, government as reformer, rule of law, strong social policy, and gradual transition. This approach facilitated a smooth shift to a market economy, achieving an average annual growth rate of 5% despite global challenges.

Under his leadership, structural transformations diversified industrial production, developing high-tech sectors like petrochemicals and automotive manufacturing. Notable projects included the Ustyurt and Shurtan gas-chemical complexes, automobile plants in Asaka and Samarkand, and infrastructure like the Angren-Pap railway with its Kamchik pass tunnel—the first high-speed train in Central Asia. Small and private businesses flourished, contributing to economic self-reliance and job creation.

Karimov's strategies exploited natural resources effectively, ensuring stability and growth. His policies positioned Uzbekistan to escape the middle-income trap through sustained development, ushering in an era of prosperity that benefited all citizens.

Karimov placed immense emphasis on social welfare, particularly in education and healthcare. He implemented a national program for personnel training aligned with international standards, establishing branches of prestigious foreign universities such as Westminster University in Tashkent and Inha University in Tashkent. This initiative elevated Uzbekistan's educational system, preparing a skilled workforce for global competitiveness.

In healthcare, reforms ensured equal access to services, introducing state-guaranteed free emergency care and specialized centers. Maternal and infant mortality rates decreased threefold, while life expectancy rose to 73.5 years for men and 76 for women. Programs like "Healthy Mother – Healthy Child" and the "Soghlom Avlod Uchun" fund underscored his commitment to family health.

Karimov also advanced sports and culture, creating 300 children's music and art schools, a three-tier sports system, and tournaments such as "Umid Nihollari" and "Barkamol Avlod"

Uzbek athletes achieved remarkable success, winning numerous Olympic and Paralympic medals. He established the Fund for the Development of Children's Sport and received the Golden Order from the International Olympic Committee. Culturally, he revived spiritual values, preserved historical sites, and celebrated anniversaries of cities like Samarkand and Bukhara, earning UNESCO medals.

Karimov's foreign policy was grounded in peace, non-interference, and mutual benefit, as outlined in the 2012 Concept of Foreign Policy Activity. He secured Uzbekistan's membership in

the United Nations in 1992 and over 100 international organizations, enhancing its global standing.

Initiatives like the nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia promoted regional security. He fostered strong ties with major powers, including the United States, Russia, and China, balancing interests for Uzbekistan's benefit.

After the September 11, 2001, attacks, he allied with the U.S., providing basing rights and receiving assistance. As chairman of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2016, he advanced cooperation in the region. His diplomacy established diplomatic relations with over 100 countries, contributing to Uzbekistan's stability and integration.

Islam Karimov's legacy endures as the symbol of Uzbekistan's independence and progress. His unbending will and visionary goals transformed the nation into a beacon of stability in Central Asia. Honored with titles like Hero of Uzbekistan, Order of Independence, and Order of Amir Temur, he received over 62 international awards and was named honorary doctor or professor by more than 10 foreign universities.

Posthumously, institutions like Tashkent State Technical University and Tashkent International Airport bear his name, while January 30 is celebrated annually and September 2 as Remembrance Day. His over 15 published works on economic and socio-political development continue to inspire. Karimov's contributions ensure Uzbekistan's continued advancement, embodying the spirit of a leader who always prioritized his people's prosperity.

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