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## THE END OF AN ERA IN UZBEKISTAN

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President Islam Karimov who ruled Uzbekistan for 27 years passed away on 2 September 2016 after a cerebral stroke. He leaves behind a stable and united country with impressive social indicators and a growing economy.

Karimov was a man of destiny and was First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party since 1989 when the Soviet Union started to unravel. He boldly seized the opportunity and declared the independence of Uzbekistan on 1 September 1991. Anticipating the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the Government of India had invited the leaders of the five Central Asian Republics on official visits hosted by the Vice President, and full protocol fit for a visiting Head of State was accorded to them. As Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan, Karimov was in India in late August 1991 and rushed back to Tashkent from Agra when the USSR was taking its last gasps.

Karimov was bold and decisive. He stared the Russians down and physically prevented the removal of movable Soviet assets from newly independent Uzbekistan, including AEROFLOT planes, military hardware, railway rolling stock, etc.

Uzbekistan is the cultural and civilizational centre of Central Asia with its historic cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, Kokand, Khiva, etc. The population of other four Central Asian countries combined is less than the 28.1 million Uzbeks. Most of the fertile Fergana Valley is in Uzbekistan. Karimov paid a lot of attention to education, health and welfare of the people. The entire country is dotted with schools, lyceums, hospitals and stadia. Citizens of neighbouring countries come to Uzbekistan for medical care. Uzbekistan won 13 medals in the recent Rio Olympics including four golds. The country has 100 per cent literacy and the average longevity is 72 years for women and 66 for men.

Karimov's foremost contribution to the region and the world is to shield Uzbekistan from the onslaught of radical Islam. In the first flush of independence after 1991, the borders were open

and there was an influx of mullahs from Pakistan and Iran as well as the distribution of Saudi-financed free Islamic literature all over the country. Karimov quickly realized the danger of the injection of religion in the secular Uzbek polity and put a stop to this ideological invasion. Mosques, madrasahs and preachers in Uzbekistan are all funded and supervised by the State leaving no room for any pernicious sermons.

Karimov was firm in crushing the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which reared its head in the 1990s. Tashkent faced a major terrorist attack in February 1999 when IMU terrorists killed 16 people by exploding six car bombs. Displaying great personal courage, Karimov personally went to the attack site and supervised the operations.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, Karimov immediately made the Karshi-Khanabad Airport near Termez available for the US and Germany free of cost. This is in contrast to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which demanded heavy payment for the use of its airport at Manas. Karimov was understandably bitter when the US and the West severely criticized Uzbekistan for crushing an Islamic rebellion in Andizhon in the summer of 2005.

President Islam Karimov was a true friend of India. He visited India as President four times. When the then Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Tashkent in 1993, the Karimov Administration allotted a prime piece of land to build the Indian Embassy. Karimov was a generous host when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited in April 2006. Overlooking protocol, President Karimov accompanied the Indian Prime Minister to the airport to see him off. In a touching gesture, he even continued to stand on the tarmac for half an hour when the take-off was delayed due to the malfunctioning of the pushback tractor. Recognising this close relationship, Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his five-nation tour of Central Asia with a meeting with President Karimov in Tashkent on 6 July 2015.

Indian films are very popular in Uzbekistan and Raj Kapoor is a loved icon. In the winter of 2006, the Embassy of India and the local Indian community had invited Randhir Kapoor, Rishi Kapoor and Nitin Mukesh, who graciously performed gratis in honour of the respect of Uzbeks for the great showman, Raj Kapoor. In a warm gesture, President Karimov declared the Kapoor group as State Guests and provided a special plane for their travel to Samarkand and Bukhara. The public response to their shows and appearances in bazaars was truly overwhelming.

Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev has taken over as interim President of Uzbekistan, and presidential elections will be held within three months. As per the Uzbek Constitution, the Senate head Nigmatilla Yuldashev was entitled to be the interim President, but he declined the position. This indicates that the Uzbek leadership has perhaps decided to project Mirziyoyev as the official presidential candidate in the elections. Mirziyoyev is 59 years old and has been the Prime Minister since 2003. He represents the Uzbek establishment and his election as President is a foregone conclusion.

Uzbeks are Turkic by race. The country needs a strong secular leader to continue on the road of progress and modernity. Any latitude to latent Islamic forces would make the country vulnerable to regression to a fundamentalist regime. A walk across the Termez Bridge over the river Amu Darya, crossing from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, is like travelling in a time machine □ from the 21st century to the 16th century. The world should be grateful to leaders like President Islam Karimov who protected the Uzbek people from the designs of the IMU to drag Uzbeks to the brutal ways of the erstwhile Khans of Bukhara and Kokand!

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