

*However, when his oldest brother, Bassel al-Assad, was killed in a car crash, he began to be groomed to succeed his father. As president, al-Assad was influential in bringing internet access and mobile technology to Syria. However, he was also criticized for continuing his father's authoritarian regime. Opponents called for major political and economic reform, eventually leading to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War by 2012. During that conflict frequent reports accused al-Assad's government of atrocities, including the use of chemical weapons on civilians, drawing international condemnation.*

**Born:** September 11, 1965; Damascus, Syria

### EARLY LIFE

Bashar al-Assad was born on September 11, 1965, in Syria's capital of Damascus. His family, whose last name translates as "lion," belongs to the Alawite sect, a small group of Muslims who have held political power in Syria since the 1960s. Al-Assad's mother was Anisa al-Assad. His father was air force commander and President Hafez al-Assad, the first political leader of independent Syria, and an extremely powerful figure in the world of Middle East politics. Al-Assad was the third of five children in a very tight-knit family. He was an accomplished volleyball, badminton and soccer player as a youth. In 1968, he began attending one of Syria's most prestigious French schools. His teachers later remembered him as being unassuming and humble in class but outgoing and popular with his schoolmates. Al-Assad married Asma Fawaz al-Akhras, a former merchant banker from a wealthy Sunni family, in December 2000. The couple had three children together: two sons, Hafez and Kareem, and a daughter, Zein.

After graduating from high school, al-Assad enrolled at the University of Damascus, where he studied medicine. Not only did he enjoy his training, he proved to be a skilled physician with a striking capacity for making patients feel at ease. He also possessed an aptitude for conducting surgical proce-



*Bashar al-Assad. Photo by Mehr News Agency, via Wikimedia Commons.*

dures. By 1998, al-Assad had chosen ophthalmology as his medical specialty and spent the next four years training in the field at a military hospital in Syria.

In 1992, al-Assad decided to leave for England to pursue more advanced training in ophthalmology, despite the fact that at the time he spoke both Arabic and French far better than he spoke English. After passing the required medical exam, al-Assad began his training at the Western Eye Hospital in central London. During the two years that he spent there, al-Assad lived a relatively solitary life, spending most of his time in the hospital or attending classes. However, he became intrigued by the power and possibility of technology, particularly computers and the internet.

with Nigeria. The demarcation of boundaries between Cameroon and Nigeria became one of the first diplomatic issues for Cameroon's fledgling government.

### CAREER IN GOVERNMENT

Biya returned to Cameroon in 1962 and joined the newly-formed Cameroon National Union (CNU) party, taking his first government post in the Department of Development Aid. At the same time, separatist elements emerged among Cameroon's ethnic groups and members of the former political zones. Relations between French- and English-speaking residents (referred to as Francophones and Anglophones) and between Christians and Muslims posed a threat to national unity. In 1967, Biya became director of President Ahidjo's civil cabinet and secretary general of the presidency, making him one of the president's closest personal aides.

In 1972, President Ahidjo passed multiple referendums to increase the powers of the CNU and the office of president. Several years later, he passed a law making it illegal to form alternative political organizations. Ahidjo was widely viewed as a dictator and faced continual pressure from militant organizations seeking his resignation. Though Cameroon's social situation remained tenuous throughout Ahidjo's administration, the economic climate showed some signs of improvement. In 1975, Biya was named prime minister, making him next in line for the presidency.

On November 6, 1982, Ahidjo abruptly resigned from the presidency, citing health concerns. As Ahidjo's legal successor, Biya assumed the presidency the following month. Ahidjo's resignation came as a surprise to the press, which published various theories about the underlying causes for the resignation and the future leadership of the government. Ahidjo's resignation was a political strategy by which he hoped to divert public dissatisfaction to Biya, while retaining leadership of the country as president of the CNU. Under Cameroon's constitution, the party ex-

ercised greater legislative control than the executive officer. It was believed that Biya would serve as a figurehead while Ahidjo continued to run the government from behind the scenes.

In the months that followed, Biya's replaced key Ahidjo supporters with his own allies, reducing Ahidjo's control over the legislature. Biya's changes significantly weakened Ahidjo's influence within a few months. In 1983, Biya announced that his security officers had prevented a coup attempt staged by supporters of former president Ahidjo, who was forced to resign as party chairman and fled to France to avoid reprisal. The following year, members of Ahidjo's former palace guard attempted to capture the presidential palace, leading to several days of armed engagement. Biya's administration accused Ahidjo of planning the attacks, which resulted in greater popular support for the new president.

Biya was elected chairman of the CNU in late 1983 and was formally elected president in 1984. Following his election, protests were held across the country. Biya increased the police presence throughout Cameroon to dissuade attacks by dissident groups. In 1985, Biya announced a series of reforms, including increased democratization of the CNU party. Despite growing public sentiment to the contrary, Biya was still unwilling to allow multi-party elections. Hoping to distinguish his administration from that of his predecessor, Biya abolished the CNU and formed the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM).

Biya formally reestablished relations with Israel in 1986, and met with Nigerian leaders to discuss the resolution of long-standing border disputes in 1987. Despite some success as a foreign leader, the international press criticized Biya for taking a lax approach to his job, taking numerous days off each year, and spending the majority of his time at European resorts.

Biya's administration inherited a government plagued by rampant corruption, and did little to combat the situation. Transparency International,

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## Fidel Castro

### President of Cuba

*Castro led a successful revolutionary struggle against the Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar—a strong ally of the wealthy elite and the United States in the late 1950s. The revolutionary leader subsequently implemented Latin America's third social revolution of the twentieth century and transformed Cuba into the first communist state of the Western Hemisphere in defiance of the United States.*

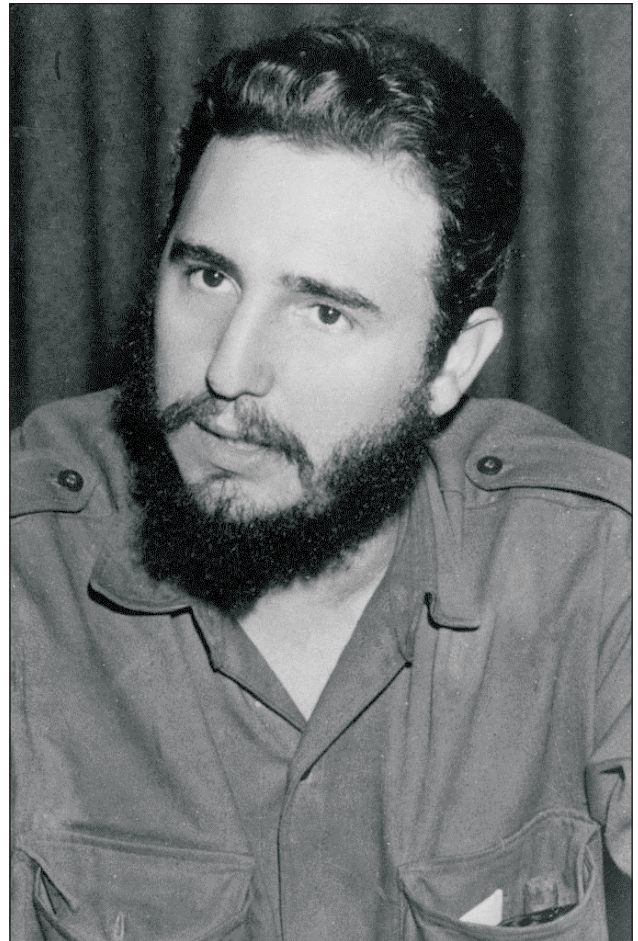
**Born:** August 13, 1926; Biran, Cuba

**Died:** November 25, 2016; Havana, Cuba

### EARLY LIFE

Fidel Castro (fee-DEHL KAHS-troh) was born on a large cattle estate near the village of Birán in Cuba's Oriente Province. Castro was the third of seven children by a prosperous Spanish immigrant landowner. Between 1941 and 1945, Castro completed his secondary education at the Colegio Belén, a prestigious Jesuit (Roman Catholic) institution in Havana. Taller in stature than the average Latin male, Castro also was a natural athlete, excelling in many sports, especially basketball and baseball, which he played with near professional ability.

Castro enrolled in the University of Havana's Law Faculty in 1945. He became a student activist in a frequently violent political setting on campus. He joined



Fidel Castro. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

one of the rival student political groups, became known for his speaking talent, and occasionally expressed nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments while condemning the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

As a university student, Castro was involved in two international incidents first, an aborted attempt in 1947 to overthrow the Dominican Republic's dictator Rafael Trujillo, and then, in 1948, political disorders following the assassination of a prominent Colombian politician in Bogotá, where Castro was attending an anti-imperialist student congress. In spite of these interruptions, Castro was able to graduate in 1950 with a doctor of laws degree.

foreign investors into the country. He gradually revealed the Cuban peso, which had become nearly worthless. This reform came as a great relief to many Cubans, as 90 percent of Cuba's population is employed by the state and is paid in Cuban pesos. Other changes Castro implemented in the country included abolishing the limits on salaries of state employees. Castro also advocated reforms to the tax system in Cuba as part of his plan to modernize the economy.

—*Gabrielle Parent*

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## Catherine the Great

### Empress of Russia (r. 1762-1796)

*One of the early enlightened monarchs, Catherine, who reigned from 1762 to 1796, attempted to create a uniform Russian government with a modern Westernized code of laws that represented all levels of Russian society with the exception of the serfs. In the forty-four years of her reign, she sculpted Russia into one of the great world powers of the time and laid the foundation for what would become modern Russia.*

**Born:** May 2, 1729; Stettin, Province of Pomerania, Kingdom of Prussia

**Died:** November 17, 1796; Saint Petersburg, Russia

### EARLY LIFE

Catherine the Great was born Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst, in Stettin, a seaport in Pomerania. Her parents, Prince Christian August and Princess Johanna Elizabeth of Holstein-Gottorp, were minor members of the German aristocracy. As a result of her strained relationship with her mother, Sophie developed into an independent young woman. Russian monarchs held the prerogative of choosing their successors, and her cousin, Duke Karl Peter Ulrich of Holstein-Gottorp, had been summoned to Russia by the childless Empress Elizabeth as the heir to the throne. It only remained to find



*Catherine the Great, portrait. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]*

plete. A near depletion of Mongolian elite from September 1937 to the end of 1939 was given with Choybalsan's approval, as well as the backing of the Russian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), and saw the execution of 20,099 persons and the imprisonment of over 5,000 more. Records mention 56,938 arrests and the elimination of 20,356 Lamas. The arrests had many face charges of counterrevolution and spying for Japan—which at the time had invaded northern China during World War II and Choybalsan declared war on—while their imprisonment was in either Mongolia or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Choybalsan held many meetings with Joseph Stalin and shared many political views with him, going as far as to adopt Stalin's policies. As the last remaining founder of the Mongolian's People Party and with the old Mongolian elite gone, Choybalsan created the People's Party to lead the revolution.

From 1940 and onward, Choybalsan held supreme power of the new government where he promoted thousands to high governmental positions. During this time Choybalsan simultaneously held the positions of prime minister, minister of internal affairs, minister of war, and commander in chief of the Mongolian armed forces. From August 1938 to January 1939 Choybalsan stayed in the USSR for medical treatments due to health-related issues. With Mongolia's involvement in World War II, he helped spread a wave of Mongolian nationalism, calling for the unification of the Mongolian People's Republic with Inner Mongolia. This unification failed to occur due to the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. During the winter of 1951 Choybalsan once again went to Moscow for medical treatment, where he would soon die of kidney cancer on January 26, 1952.

### SIGNIFICANCE

In history, Choybalsan would be known as a stout Stalin follower, applying many of Stalin's policies and methods in Mongolia to secure Mongolia's independ-

ence. As a result, the system Choybalsan created and ran the country on was one of a dictator, fueled by the violent suppression of any source of opposition where over tens of thousands were executed or prosecuted by the end of his time in power. Followers of Choybalsan remained even following his death, up until the speech of Soviet ruler Nikita Khrushchev's regarding de-Stalinization, where they would fracture. There are many who, to present day, are defenders of Choybalsan, who honor Choybalsan for his nationalism and securing Mongolia's independence, and shoulder the blame of the 1930 purges and annihilation of monasteries on the Soviets. The city in which Choybalsan was born is named after him to this day, and a statue of him remains in the front of Mongolia's National University. In modern Mongolian history, Choybalsan's reign would mark the first and last time and individual had absolute political power.

—Kristina Domizio

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## Henri Christophe

### President and king of Haiti

*Christophe was one of the three great black leaders of the Haitian revolution. After the removal of Toussaint-Louverture to France and the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, he was chosen president of the Haitian republic, but his rule proved to be disastrous.*

**Born:** October 6, 1767; Island of Grenada, British West Indies

**Died:** October 8, 1820; Sans Souci palace, Haiti

ager. Her subsequent determination not to allow men to manipulate her became an important factor in her forty-five-year reign. Political events tested her mettle early. Seymour fell under suspicion of treason against his brother Edward, lord protector of Edward, the boy king, and Elizabeth was sharply questioned about possible complicity. The fifteen-year-old princess responded shrewdly and prudently, and though Seymour was executed, she was permitted to live quietly until Edward's death in 1553.

Those who saw Elizabeth take part in her sister's coronation ceremony saw a young woman somewhat taller than average, with reddish-gold hair and light skin. Although her portrait was often painted, the stylized likenesses of Renaissance royalty often prove unreliable, and even eyewitnesses disagreed considerably about the details of her physical appearance, but everyone credited her with beautiful hands. While not a particularly religious person, Elizabeth deplored Mary's Roman Catholicism and, like many English patriots, was apprehensive about Mary's decision to marry the Catholic prince Philip (Philip II) of Spain. Again, in Mary's reign, Elizabeth was suspected of treason, this time in connection with Sir Thomas Wyatt the Younger's plan to depose Mary in favor of her, for presumably Elizabeth would marry an Englishman and a Protestant and thus avert the danger of the crown passing to an offspring of Philip and Mary. Though imprisoned in the Tower of London for a time, Elizabeth again dodged the extreme penalty; she emerged understanding thoroughly, however, the danger of even the appearance of treason.

Eventually, Philip, seeing his wife childless and ill and viewing Elizabeth as preferable to such a claimant as Mary Stuart (Mary, Queen of Scots), wife of the French dauphin, became the protector of the future queen. This precarious period in the princess's life ended on November 17, 1558, when the unpopular Mary died and Elizabeth, at the age of twenty-five, became the third of Henry VIII's children to wear the English crown.

## CAREER IN GOVERNMENT

Elizabeth understood the presumably modern art of public relations, and from her coronation onward she worked to gain the admiration of her subjects. She also surrounded herself with able advisers, the most faithful of whom was William Cecil (from 1571, known as Lord Burghley), and he served her well for forty years. The domestic question—whom would she marry?—early became a question of foreign relations also, for the most ambitious bachelors of Western Europe recognized her as the greatest available “prize.” The archduke Charles of Austria offered a politically advantageous match, but both Elizabeth and her subjects shied away from his Roman Catholicism. Elizabeth appeared to prefer one of her own subjects, Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, eligible in 1560 after the death of his wife Amy Robsart, but the mystery surrounding her fatal fall down a flight of stairs cast a shadow over his name. There was no lack of other suitors, and all England expected Elizabeth to avert the disorder likely at the death of an unmarried and childless queen, but the strong-willed sovereign did not intend to yield an iota of her sovereignty to any man, and the sort of person who would content himself with being a mere consort probably appealed little to her imagination. Throughout the early years of her reign, she kept everyone guessing about her marriage plans, but she made no commitments.

Mary, Queen of Scots, whose grandmother Henry VIII's sister had married the Scottish king James IV, posed one threat to England's security, particularly after her first husband became King Francis II of France in 1559, for France was England's traditional enemy. To neutralize the French threat, Elizabeth encouraged Scottish fears of foreign authority, even suggesting the possibility of her own marriage to the earl of Arran, whose family ranked high in the Scottish succession. When Francis died in 1560, however, Mary's influence declined, and her subsequent marriage to her kinsman, the unstable Lord Darnley (Henry Stewart), led to her undoing. Eventually, she

As president, Karimov then declared Uzbekistan's independence and freedom from Soviet control. The move came after a series of coups against the former Soviet Union's Communist Party and within Uzbekistan neighbor republics. In an effort to separate his Communist Party from the party of Uzbekistan's ousted leadership, Karimov renamed it the Popular Democratic Party of Uzbekistan in September 1991. However, the goals of the new party remained closely aligned with the goals of the former Communist Party.

The first nationwide free elections were held in Uzbekistan on December 29, 1991, making Karimov the first president of the independent Uzbekistan. Despite the presence of opponents on the ballot, several organizations, including Human Rights Watch, called into question the legitimacy of the opposition's chances and the counting of the ballots. They also cited instances of Karimov jailing political dissenters.

International watch groups continued to decry the political election system of Karimov's government. In 1995, Karimov's government passed a national referendum that extended his period in office, without elections, to 2000. At the end of his term in 2000, elections were held with only one opponent, who publicly endorsed Karimov before the election and reportedly announced that he only joined the elections to make them appear fair and free. Karimov's victory guaranteed him another five years as president, and in 2002, another referendum extended his term to 2007.

During the summer of 2001, Karimov's government pledged to release nearly 1,000 political prisoners taken into custody during Karimov's ten years as president in order to appease Western nations. However, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States called on Uzbekistan as a political ally on the US-led "war on terror," and Karimov refused to release a majority of the political prisoners. The released prisoners remain under surveillance and several have been killed, with the government classifying them as terrorists.

Muslims make up about 88 percent of the population of Uzbekistan. However, since the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union, political and religious opposition to Islam has been widespread. In 1998, Karimov passed a law requiring all religious groups to register with the government so that they could be monitored. Critics of Karimov's government pointed to the US endorsement of Uzbekistan's fight against Islamic extremists as adding to the repression and monitoring within the country.

On May 13, 2005, protestors gathered in Andijan, a provincial capital within Uzbekistan, demanding the release of 2,000 prisoners after the dubious trial of twenty-three businessmen. Government troops stormed the protestors, resulting in substantial loss of life (although official estimates were never released, it is thought to be between 200 and 800 deaths). Karimov stated to the international community that the protest was organized by terrorists, thus justifying the use of force. Karimov continued to deny requests by international bodies to investigate the events, which ultimately prompted the European Union (EU) to impose sanctions on Uzbekistan.

Despite a constitutional amendment restricting the presidency to two terms, on December 23, 2007, Karimov was elected to a third term as the president, with 88 percent of the vote. Asliddin Rustamov of the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDP) received 3.7 percent of the vote, Diloram Tashmukhamedov of the Adolat Social-Democratic Party won 2.94 percent, and Akmal Saidov, the director of Uzbekistan's National Center for Human Rights, won 2.85 percent. The vote was condemned by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as unfair, undemocratic and lacking transparency. Karimov is expected to serve his full seven-year term.

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

The United Nation Human Rights Council (UNHRC) condemned Karimov's government, releasing a spe-