

Oil industry veteran to lead next round of Cop climate change summit

Mukhtar Babayev is named president-in-waiting of UN climate summit to be held in November

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- Sceptics have already raised questions over the appointment of Mukhtar Babayev to the role. Photograph: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters

Cop29, the next round of UN talks to tackle the climate crisis, will be led by another veteran of the oil and gas industry.

Mukhtar Babayev, Azerbaijan's ecology and natural resources minister, has been appointed the president-in-waiting for the Cop29 climate talks when they take place in the country in November.

Before his entry into politics in the autocratic country in western Asia, once a Soviet republic, Babayev spent 26 years working for the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (Socar).

Close observers of the Cop process will see parallels with the appointment of Sultan Al Jaber, who moonlighted from his role as the chief executive of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company to preside over the summit when it took place in Dubai last year.

Sceptics have already begun to point to Babayev's appointment as raising questions over the commitment to the global phase-out of fossil fuels in Azerbaijan. The country relied on oil and gas for more than 92.5% of its export revenue last year, according to the US government's International Trade Administration.

But Babayev does have form in environmental protection, having spent three years as Socar's vice-president for ecology, in which time he oversaw efforts to remediate Azerbaijan's contaminated soils. The country is wrestling with a number of severe ecological problems, including, after 160 years of oil production, decades-worth of damage from the petrochemical organisations that operate there.

Born in Baku while Azerbaijan was still part of the USSR, Babayev served in the Soviet military before studying political science at Moscow State University and then foreign economic relations at the Azerbaijan State University of Economics.

He joined Socar in 1994, working in foreign economic relations and marketing until his appointment as the company's ecology tsar in 2008. According to a US diplomatic cable published by [WikiLeaks](#), on his appointment to that role Babayev hosted the first ecology conference in Azerbaijan's history.

In the environment role, he described remediation as the "shared mission and moral imperative" of all Azerbaijanis, but also said that any fall in oil prices could hamper efforts.

US diplomats reported him as saying in a subsequent meeting that his mission was to "change the mentality" of Azerbaijanis about their responsibilities to the environment, and even joking that his new role made him and Socar's first vice-president "enemies".

But he reportedly emphasised his role was to change Socar's attitude to the environment while nonetheless continuing to develop Azerbaijan's oil industry.

In 2010, Babayev entered politics, becoming an MP for the ruling New Azerbaijan party, which has won every election in the country since 1993. He was appointed minister for ecology in 2018, in which role he has fulminated against alleged ecological destruction by Armenians living in territories claimed by Azerbaijan.

Simon Stiell, the UN climate change executive secretary, welcomed the appointment, exhorting his team to work with Babayev and Yalchin Rafiyev, his lead negotiator, to deliver “a successful Cop29”.

The Azerbaijan government has been approached for comment.

Azerbaijan appoints no women to 28-member Cop29 climate committee

Campaigners condemn decision as regressive, saying ‘climate change affects whole world, not half of it’

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- Mukhtar Babayev, who spent 26 years working for Azerbaijan's state oil company, is the Cop29 president-designate. Photograph: Rafiq Maqbool/AP

The organising committee for the Cop29 global climate change summit in Azerbaijan in December comprises 28 men and no women, the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, has announced.

The decision was called “regressive” by the She Changes Climate campaign group, which said “climate change affects the whole world, not half of it”. In contrast, 63% of the members of the organising committee for the Cop28 climate summit, held in the United Arab Emirates last month, were women.

Almost all members of the Cop29 committee are government ministers or officials, including the head of the state security service. The head of Azerbaijan's state gas distribution network is also on the committee.

In a statement, She Changes Climate said: “This [committee] is a regressive step in the journey towards gender parity in climate; but there is still time for change. We ask for equal representation in the governance of this year's climate talks, because climate change affects the whole world, not half of it.”

For the second year in a row, the UN's most important climate talks will be hosted by a petro-state heavily reliant on fossil fuel production. The Cop29 president-designate, who will be responsible for bringing together countries to drive climate action, is Mukhtar Babayev, the minister of ecology and natural resources.

Babayev previously spent 26 years working for the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (Socar). Azerbaijan plans to increase its fossil fuel production by a third over the next decade, the Guardian revealed last week.

“We once again ask for a firewall between the fossil fuel industry and the Cop presidency as environmental integrity remains a concern for us and many civil society organisations,” said She Changes Climate.

Scientists say a rapid fall in fossil fuel burning is vital to avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis and 2023 was the hottest year on record by a huge margin.

The Cop28 president was Sultan Al Jaber, who was also the chief executive of the UAE's state oil company, Adnoc, which led to accusations of conflicts of interest.

Al Jaber's angry comments during an exchange with Mary Robinson, the chair of the Elders group of statespeople, at a She Changes Climate event caused uproar at Cop28 after being revealed by the Guardian. He said there was "no science" indicating that a phaseout of fossil fuels was needed to restrict global heating to 1.5C above pre-industrial levels, and that a phaseout would not allow sustainable development "unless you want to take the world back into caves".

Oisín Coghlan, the chief executive of Friends of the Earth Ireland, posted on X: "Sweet Holy Jesus. 28 men o women to organise Cop29. Calling Mary Robinson of @TheElders: there's another sultan-type we need you to have a word with."

Cop28 delivered an agreement by the world's nations to transition away from fossil fuels, the first time the cause of the climate crisis had been mentioned in a decision text. After Cop28, Al Jaber said he would continue with his oil company's expansion of oil and gas production.