

# The weight of counterfactuals in Bangladesh's politics



Dr Faridul Alam  
is a retired academic and writes from New York City, US.

FARIDUL ALAM

*"Cleopatra's nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed."*

— Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670)

History is never merely a record of what happened; it is also haunted by what might have happened otherwise. This is the realm of the counterfactual: thinking about history through "what if" scenarios. Pascal's famous remark about Cleopatra's nose underscores the fragility of events and the disproportionate consequences of contingencies. The point is not the physical feature itself but the insight it offers: the past was never predetermined, and history could easily have taken different turns.

For Bangladesh, the July uprising in 2024 that ousted Sheikh Hasina offers a reminder of this fragility. What if the uprising had failed? Authoritarianism might still be entrenched, dissent muted, and cronyism unchecked. That it did not fail suggests how even the most ossified systems can suddenly give way—how history always contains the seeds of the unexpected. Counterfactual thinking sharpens this awareness: democracy nearly materialised at different moments before, and thus remains possible now.

Unlike the deterministic chaos theory in the natural sciences, which studies how tiny differences in initial conditions produce unpredictable outcomes within strictly deterministic systems, counterfactuals are interpretive tools. Chaos theory uncovers hidden order within randomness; counterfactual thinking insists that history has no inevitability—only paths chosen and paths foreclosed. It foregrounds human agency, political choices, and the interplay of structure and contingency. By asking "what might have been," we illuminate the fragility and openness of political life.

Counterfactuals do not rewrite history. Rather, they show that outcomes were shaped by choices, accidents, and circumstances that could have gone another way. In fragile

democracies like Bangladesh, counterfactuals often expose missed opportunities and compel us to reflect on the stakes of decision-making.

**Why counterfactuals matter**

Counterfactuals sharpen political analysis in two ways. First, they clarify causality: asking "What if X had not occurred?" highlights why X mattered and how it shaped subsequent developments. Second, they reveal the stakes of choices: what might have been gained or lost. In Bangladesh, where democracy remains precarious, counterfactuals remind us that crises are not inevitable. They are produced by decisions, betrayals, and failures of imagination. Thinking counterfactually insists that things could have been otherwise, and that democratic renewal remains thinkable precisely because it almost materialised before.

**What if the Mujib-Zia assassinations hadn't happened?**

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in August 1975 was the original trauma of independent Bangladesh. It unleashed coups and counter-coups that derailed the democratic promise of 1971. Had Mujib lived, would Bangladesh have matured into a functioning democracy, or would his centralising tendencies—as epitomised by BAKSAL—have hardened into autocracy? His charisma and legitimacy might have stabilised the nation, yet his concentration of power risked suffocating pluralism.

The counterfactual exposes a tragic paradox: the architect of liberation may have inadvertently laid the foundation for authoritarianism. Could Mujib have recalibrated BAKSAL towards inclusivity, decentralising authority to accommodate diverse voices? Or was the trajectory already fixed towards centralisation? Even leaders with immense legitimacy are constrained by structural and personal tendencies that can distort political outcomes.

Ziaur Rahman's assassination in 1981

foreclosed the possibility of a gradual evolution towards stability. He sought to institutionalise pluralism through grassroots local government and by expanding political space beyond Awami League. Had he survived, might Bangladesh have developed a sturdier democratic framework, or would reliance on military patronage have eroded civilian supremacy? His reforms were ambitious but tethered to fragile compromises, including reintegrating actors who had opposed the Liberation War.

The counterfactual reveals Zia's precarious balance—expanding pluralism while remaining dependent on military guardianship. His survival might have steered Bangladesh towards democratisation, but also risked entrenching military oversight.

civilian ambition and military tutelage. What might have stabilised democracy under one scenario could equally have entrenched authoritarianism under another. These "roads not taken" form a polyphonic counterfactual narrative in which Bangladesh's path is contingent, contested, and never predetermined.

**Echoes of missed possibilities**

Later turning points echo these early ruptures:

**1990:** What if the mass uprising had failed to topple Ershad? Prolonged military rule might have replaced democratic restoration.

**2007 08:** What if the caretaker government had institutionalised itself? Military-backed technocracy might have replaced democracy in the name of reform.

**2014:** What if the boycotted election had

and sustain hope. Citizens often articulate grievances in counterfactual terms, "Things could have been different if only..." Opposition parties mobilise around such claims, arguing that elections were stolen or reforms betrayed. Even authoritarian regimes weaponise counterfactuals, warning that without their grip, chaos would ensue.

In Bangladesh, the counterfactual plays a double role: both lament for missed opportunities and horizon of possibility. It reminds us that setbacks were contingent, not inevitable, and that renewal remains possible, precisely because it once almost was. To dwell on counterfactuals is not nostalgia but vigilance, the awareness that alternative futures remain open, demanding action in the present.

**The limits of counterfactuals**

Yet, counterfactuals carry risks. They can romanticise paths that may not have led to better outcomes. They can become partisan weapons, each side claiming vindication if only events turned differently. Worst of all, obsession with "what might have been" can paralyse action, trapping politics in shadows rather than clarifying "what must be done now."

Counterfactuals must serve as mirrors, not escapes: sharpening our understanding of how choices matter without substituting for deliberate action.

Bangladesh's politics has been shaped almost as much by what did not happen as by what did:



**'Bangladesh's politics has been shaped almost as much by what did not happen as by what did.'**

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Viewed contrapuntally, the counterfactuals of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman reveal a layered tension in Bangladesh's early trajectory. Mujib's centralisation promised decisive governance but risked suppressing pluralism, while Zia's decentralisation expanded political space yet relied on the military. Imagining Mujib's survival raises the question of authoritarian consolidation versus inclusivity; imagining Zia's survival highlights the paradox of democratisation from above.

Taken together, these counterfactuals show that Bangladesh's fragility was not merely the result of assassinations but rooted in deeper contradictions: oscillation between centralisation and pluralisation,

been participatory? One party dominance and democratic decay might have been avoided.

**2024:** What if the July uprising had failed? Bangladesh might still be mired in authoritarianism, dissent stifled and cronyism unchecked.

Viewed together, these counterfactuals extend the shadow of the 1975 and 1981 assassinations. The oscillation between democratic aspiration and authoritarian relapse has persisted, as if the nation remains trapped in cycles set in motion by its early ruptures.

**Counterfactuals as political imagination**

Counterfactuals are not mere intellectual games; they fuel protest, shape narratives,

"The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of," Pascal wrote. Counterfactuals cannot change the past, but they remind us that history was never inevitable and that the future remains open. In a country where democracy still hangs in the balance, counterfactuals serve as both lens and compass, showing that democracy nearly emerged more than once, and may yet emerge if imagination is joined with action.

## Will Trump's fast-track diplomacy win him a Nobel?



Syed Raiyan Amir  
is senior research associate at The KRF Center for Bangladesh and Global Affairs (CBGA). He can be reached at raiyanbqa@gmail.com

SYED RAIYAN AMIR

The Nobel Peace Prize has a history of turning political moments into global milestones. For US presidents, the list is short: Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, Woodrow Wilson in 1919, Jimmy Carter in 2002, and Barack Obama in 2009. Each recognition came with a sense that something tangible had shifted—either a war had ended, or a new framework for peace had been set in motion. The committee usually looks for results that feel bigger than the person being awarded.

Donald Trump, if his own remarks are any guide, would not mind seeing his name added. He has often said he wants to "surpass Obama" and likes presenting himself as a dealmaker who can stop wars faster than anyone else. The recent meeting with Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, Alaska, was staged as one of those opportunities. The optics were dramatic: Putin, welcomed with red carpet treatment on US soil for the first time since the start of the Ukraine War in 2022; Trump, smiling and shaking hands as if he was already halfway to a peace deal.

But the outcome was thinner than the build-up. After three hours behind closed doors, the two men appeared together and spoke in vague terms about "progress." There was no ceasefire, no concrete breakthrough. Trump repeated his familiar line—"no deal until there's a deal"—and promised to brief NATO leaders and Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky. Putin, more upbeat, called the meeting "long overdue" and framed it as the beginning of a path to peace, but he offered nothing indicating he was ready to scale back the war.

For Putin, just showing up in Alaska was a win. He got an image makeover: a statesman once again welcomed on Western soil, not a pariah boxed out of summits. The handshakes and warm words cost

him nothing, and he left without conceding territory or security guarantees. For Trump, the meeting gave a platform to present himself as the only American leader capable of bringing Russia to the table. He later told Fox News that Zelensky "has to make a deal," framing Ukraine's choices as the hinge on which peace will turn.

That bluntness is classic Trump.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

**For Trump, the recent meeting in Alaska is another chance to frame himself as a peacemaker, whereas for Putin, it is proof he is no longer isolated.**

He likes the big reveal, the fast track, the headline-grabbing moment. His style echoes the old superpower summits, when Washington and Moscow carved out spheres of influence over smaller countries. The difference now is that Ukraine is not a pawn but a sovereign state, fighting for survival, and Europe expects to be consulted at every step. Bargaining "over their heads" risks undercutting allies who would be critical in enforcing any settlement.

The Alaska talks underline both the appeal and the risk of Trump's approach. His defenders say his unpredictability keeps rivals off balance, and sometimes disruption can break the deadlock. The

counterargument is just as strong: rushed deals rarely last. A ceasefire slapped together in a day could unravel within months, especially with deep territorial disputes and Europe's security architecture at stake. Roosevelt's peace deal between Russia and Japan held for nearly a decade; Trump's would need to survive its first year without collapsing.

There's also the question of buy-in. NATO allies want ironclad guarantees that Ukraine's sovereignty won't be traded away. European leaders, after Trump's calls, praised his effort but stressed that international borders "cannot be changed by force." That line was less about Putin and more about warning Trump not to accept a land swap that Kyiv itself rejects. Zelensky, for his part, welcomed the idea of a trilateral meeting with the US and Russia but reminded everyone that Europe must be involved at every stage.

The Nobel committee tends to reward not just boldness but durability. Roosevelt had a treaty. Wilson had the League of Nations. Carter had Camp David, sustained with US support for decades. Obama's prize was more aspirational, but it reflected a belief in a moral shift in US diplomacy. Trump's bid, by contrast, rests on his ability to turn flash into something that endures—no easy task when the core conflict shows little sign of winding down.

Still, the Alaska summit showed why Trump's name keeps popping up in these conversations. He creates high-visibility turning points, even if they end without a deal. He projects confidence that he, alone, can cut through the fog of war. For his supporters, that willingness to try, and to shake hands with adversaries others would not touch, is itself a step towards peace. For critics, it is theatre that allows Putin to buy time while the war grinds on.

When the two men wrapped up their remarks in Anchorage, Putin quipped, "Next time, in Moscow." Trump smiled and didn't rule it out. The line captured the unsettled nature of the moment: nothing resolved, everything still possible, and both leaders walking away with something to claim. For Trump, it is

another chance to frame himself as a peacemaker. For Putin, it is proof he is no longer isolated. For Ukraine, the war rages on, waiting to see if Trump's fast-track diplomacy is substance or

just another show.

Whether Trump's approach can translate vague progress into a lasting framework for peace remains uncertain, but the possibility keeps his

name in the conversation for Oslo. The question lingers like an unfinished play: Nobel or not Nobel—that is the riddle Trump seems determined to keep alive.

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার

অধ্যক্ষের কার্যালয়

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স

ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

[ptc@fireservice.gov.bd](mailto:ptc@fireservice.gov.bd)

তারিখ: ০৫/০৫/১৪৩২ বঙ্গাব্দ  
২০/০৮/২০২৫ খ্রি।

গাছ বিক্রয়ের উন্মুক্ত নিলাম দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি

স্থানক নং- ৫৮.০৩.০০০০.০০২.১৬.০১৩.২৫-১২৬

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

১০০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

১২০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

১৪০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

১৬০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

১৮০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

২০০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

২২০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

২৪০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

২৬০০/- (এক হাজার টাকা মাত্র) অফের যোগ।

ফায়ার সার্ভিস ও সিভিল ডিফেন্স ট্রেনিং কম্পেন্সি, মিরপুর, ঢাকা।

২