Hartal Video Game?

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When you see a few gangly young men dancing and prancing behind a TV reporter and the sound is off, it could mean anything. It could be the euphoria from Bangladesh's remarkable performance on the fourth day of the first test series with Sri Lanka. It could be rag day at some public university. It could be an *anondo michhil* (celebratory procession) by Chhatra League. It could be so many things.

Last Monday (March 11) while watching the news if you had the TV on mute then you may have wondered what those young fellows were dancing and prancing and grinning about. Then you would have seen a burning tyre - uh oh - that's kind of telling. Then you would have been amazed when some of these exuberant youths brandished a bamboo stick and a huge piece of brick indicating that the game was on. Here TV cameras have a hypnotic quality on people, whether they are party cadres or just your ordinary hooligan on the street. Even sociopaths become unusually talkative as if compelled to blandly blurt out the gory details of their crime just for those few seconds of airtime: *and then I slit his throat, then cut him into 12 pieces then put them in a bag...*



Jostling for attention from the camera person reaches its height at press briefings in courts, when politicians announce the next round of political programmes, when a high ranking police official talks about the law and order situation and of course during the placing of wreaths at memorials. These otherwise unknown people will shove and poke their way to get into the frame or just stand right behind the main character in the show, looking innocuous and casual. For the TV audience it is quite distracting when a police official is talking about a grisly crime while some fool right behind him, in a bright orange shirt, keeps running his fingers through his hair and looking seductively into the camera.

Apart from being intensely irritating this sort of desperate need for attention is not necessarily harmful. What is disturbing however, is the unashamed display of vandals dancing about announcing their plans to vandalise and attack the following day.

Hartal has become a part of life for people and even children are all too familiar with this phenomenon. Before, it just meant no school on week days, dreary make-up classes on weekends and an excuse to loll around the whole day. Nowadays a hartal means (if you venture out of the house) the possibility of being attacked by just about anything – a piece of brick, rubber bullet, petrol bomb or a few hired thugs smashing the vehicle you are in, into smithereens.

Children, unlike us, are more practical. They will not sit in a corner biting their nails worrying about their future. In most cases they are lost in the world of play - whether in real time or virtual. In all probability they have started replacing a game of 'cops and robbers' with cops and hartal goons. Even video games may be created to cater to this modern phenomenon with complex plots consisting of war criminals, AL, BNP, police, cadres, grenades, guns and bamboo sticks. Helmets, bullet-proof vests, armoured personnel carriers, tear gas canisters could be added features. You hit a target and you get a bag full of bullets, you get hit, well then it's pretty much game over dude.

The idea, though a little creepy, could be extended for adults who are known to be just as much tempted by video games as children. Instead of sweating it out in the streets and getting people unnecessarily wounded, our political parties could fight it out through a grand, televised video game. Players would include the two leaders of the major political parties, their immediate deputies and the deputies of these deputies plus a few major student leaders.

In this complex game of virtual combat, the players will have to find all the loopholes in their opponents' strategy – hidden wads of black money, money laundering scams, corruption charges, delinquent offspring, diabolical conspiracies to make the opponent look bad etc. Every time a player scores with the help of virtual cocktails, bamboo sticks, well paid cadres and politicised police, his or her virtual persona gets to make a five minute tirade on the evils of the opponent and his/her own saintly activities.

In the background of course will be those young, brazen youths, prancing around, brandishing rods, bricks and firearms.