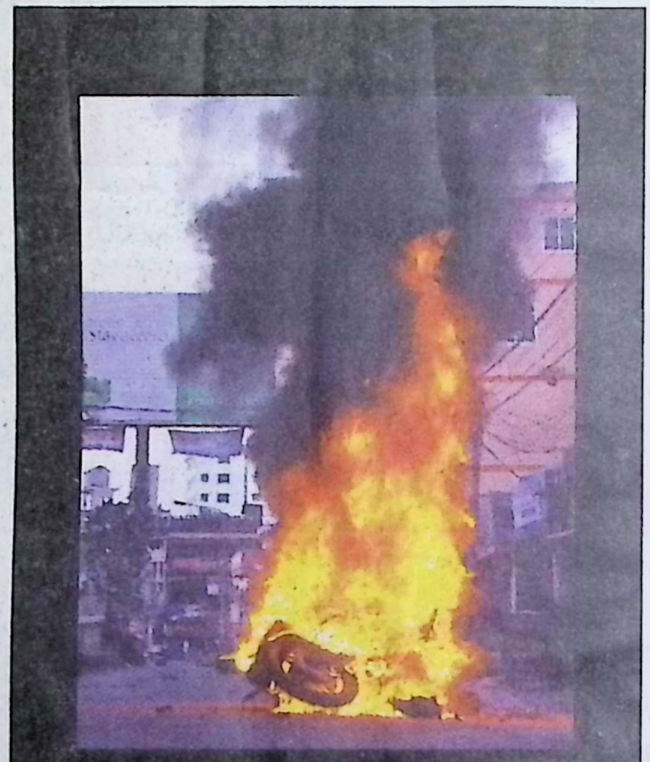


# The World's Most Bizarre Nation Award

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It is strange that people will do anything for attention. Which is why we have those bizarre Guinness World Records of individual's with the longest nails, most hair on their face or the ability to eat a thousand *roshogollas* in an hour. It's a bit sickening but the desired effect of shock and awe is definitely achieved.

Bangladesh has recently rather unwittingly, fallen into the category of a nation with the most bizarre politics in the world.

It is where anyone can call a hartal anytime for anything. A hartal now means creating as much chaos and terror as possible to make sure that the general public does not dare carry out their daily activities. Setting fire to vehicles no matter who they belong to is the first rule of thumb in observing the hartal. Of course the hartal activists make sure that they do not vandalise property of people from their own party or their relatives and friends - now *that* would be too bizarre.

It is where thugs beat up cops, sometimes to death, out in the open, while other policemen cower in fear. While they can do little to prevent the mayhem committed in front of their very eyes, members of the same force will lose no time in beating up journalists, teachers and university students, political activists even when they are carrying out a peaceful demonstration.

It is where people are robbed of all their valuables, stabbed for a mobile phone or gold bangle but where very few people will lodge a complaint at the police station.

It is where political leaders of one of the biggest parties will openly endorse mindless attacks and killing of their opponents as a 'show of strength' of the party.

It is where the prime minister keeps forgetting that she is the leader of the entire nation and not just the chief of the ruling party.

It is where the leader of the opposition party forgets that she is a popular (at least to some) leader who cannot say things like *we will go for tougher programmes* when it means burning vehicles with people inside them and destroying places of worship.

It is where ruling party thugs can butcher someone in full public view and get away with it.

It is where despite women leading the government and major opposition party, bigots can get away with demeaning women and threatening to take the nation to a medieval state.

It is where people disappear without a trace.

It is where being recognised internationally for development work can become a curse.

It is also where irrationally, hope lives and the young are ready to struggle, fight and demand, a better future.

In case you didn't know, Bangladesh is also a place where spitting is a national pastime although spitting at someone's face is the ultimate form of humiliation and invitation for some serious clobbering. Having said that and all the other things that we do as we vie for the coveted 'World's Most Bizarre Nation' think about the Masai tribe who *greet* each other by spitting. Spitting on the hand before shaking someone's hand is a way of showing respect. Also, men spit on newborns, further upsetting them by saying they are bad - all this so they have happy lives as praising a baby is considered bad luck. Imagine, we could say - in *our* country sworn enemies try to solve political stalemates by constantly attacking each other in the streets and calling each other bad names. Even the Masai cannot beat that.