

Globalization of human cooperation and knowledge



Richard Stallman is the founder of GNU project and the President of Free Software Foundation. He -- widely acclaimed as the guru of free software movement -- is best known for his relentless advocacy for free software and activism against software patents and expansions of copyright law. In an email interview with The Daily Star's **Tasneem Khalil**, Stallman talks about free software and the politics involved.

Tasneem Khalil: To start with the basic, what is "free software" according to the definition endorsed by the free software movement? **Richard Stallman:** Free software means software that respects the users' freedom. There are four essential freedoms for a user of software, any software: Freedom to

run the program, as you wish. Freedom to study the program's source code, and change it so that the program does what you wish. Freedom to make copies and distribute them to others (including publication), when you wish. Freedom to distribute your modified versions (including publication),

when you wish. If a program respects all four of these freedoms, it is free software, meaning that the social system of its distribution is ethical. Software which denies these freedoms is proprietary software; it keeps its users divided and helpless, under the power of the developer.

Proprietary software is a social problem, and our goal is to correct that problem. **What promises does free software hold for developing countries? Do you agree that a "software economy" based on the "free software model" will contribute immensely towards erasing the digital divide?** Freedom is just as vital for poor people as it is for wealthy people. Many people in Bangladesh are very poor and don't use computers, so the problem of non-free software does not affect them (they have other problems in their lives). But anyone in Bangladesh who does have a computer is in the same position as an American who has a computer. Both deserve freedom, in this area of life just as in other areas. The freedoms of free software enable people to redistribute copies widely; they are not required to pay for permission to do so, because they are free to do it. As a result, they can enable people who are barely able to afford computer hardware to make it run, without the need to pay for software as well. But this is a secondary benefit. Freedom is more important than saving an expense. **In your writings and speeches, you have compared "free software" to "free speech." Would you like to explain?** Free software is like free speech in that both are examples of human rights: the word "free" has the same

meaning in both expressions. Both use the same figure of speech: it is not literally your software, or your words, that are free. In both cases, the one who enjoys the freedom is you, a person. Free speech means you can use your voice freely; free software means you can use your computer freely. A proprietary program is under the sole control of its developer. The developer decides what it will do, and what it will not do. As a result, developers can impose their will on the users. Microsoft is not alone in doing this. It is not uncommon for developers to implement malicious features -- designed to spy on users (spyware), restrict users (Digital Restrictions Management aka DRM), even attack users (back doors). Incompatibility with de-facto or official standards can also be an intentional malicious feature. Free software develops democratically under the control of its users. Even users that don't know how to change a program can choose which version to run, so they participate in deciding what features to add and what features to remove. Thus, free software does not give anyone power over others, and no one is in a position to impose malicious features. **Free softwares -- GNU/Linux, Apache, Firefox, Wordpress -- are now replacing their proprietary rivals in millions of desktops and servers around the world. What are the strengths that fuel this success?**

Two decades of experience have shown that freedom often brings secondary benefits such as making software powerful and reliable. Many users are attracted by this. Free software is an example of the globalization of human cooperation and knowledge. Many free programs have developers in several continents as well as users in just about every nation. Cooperation and knowledge are good things, so globalizing them makes them better. This helps partly to compensate for the kind of globalization that thousands protest: globalization of evil things such as the power of business. **The southern Indian state of Kerala is in the process of changing over all computers in its 12,500 high schools from Windows to GNU/Linux systems. This was prompted by your recent visit to India. How big a success is this?** The activists of the Free Software Foundation of India have worked for years to build a relationship with the government of Kerala, and with the (then) opposition party which is now in power. My visit provided the occasion to announce a decision which the activists' work had already prepared. Kerala is the largest jurisdiction which has undertaken such a change. The Spanish state of Extremadura has already migrated completely to GNU/Linux, but Kerala is much more populous, so

this is a much bigger success. I am really glad about it. But look at how many states and countries have not yet made this change. That shows how far we have to go before freedom's victory. **In his recent visit to Bangladesh, Bill Gates announced that Microsoft will train over 10,000 teachers and 200,000 students in information technology in Bangladesh. How do you see his recent visits to developing countries aimed at exploring new markets for proprietary softwares from Microsoft?** Free software gives its users freedom, while proprietary software subjugates them. Thus, schools that have computers must make a moral choice: to prepare their students for life in a free society, or train them for lifelong subjugation. Teaching students to use MS Windows is like teaching them to use addictive drugs: it creates a dependency which students will carry with them on finishing school. And you can be sure Microsoft will not offer gratis copies to the companies and institutions they work for after graduation -- only the first dose is gratis. When schools teach the use of non-free software, they become levers in the hands of the software's developers, levers which they employ to direct all of society deeper under their control. I could not understand what the

Chief Minister of Kerala said when he spoke at our event, since he said it in Malayalam, but I am sure that Kerala's decision comes from recognition that the schools' mission is not served by inculcating dependency on mega-corporations. I hope that Bangladesh makes a similar decision. **How do you, as an activist, see the politics of free software?** I've spent two decades fighting specifically for computer users to have control of their computing. This does not mean I believe those rights are more important than other human rights. I have simply focused on the problem that falls in my field, the software field. It was the problem against which I could make the most headway. Today as in the past, all human rights are linked: losing one makes it harder to defend the others. Computers in the hands of unscrupulous despots make it possible to monitor and control people as never before. This comes at a time when despotism is advancing all around the world, and gaining its inspiration from a regime in Washington that opposes human rights in general. We need to fight harder to defend all kinds of human rights, and reject government plans to "protect" us by taking them away.

Democratic election?

It is more or less obvious that this type of government cannot hope for being re-elected by the people in a free and fair election. So, the government has set the stage for a managed election for obtaining a manipulated result in their favour. In case of the present alliance government, from the very first day of taking power the intention had been two-fold: to reap benefit and to take all possible steps so that the next election cannot be made free and fair, with a view to ensure a manipulated win.

GM QUADER

DEMOCRACY literally means rule by the people. The term is derived from the Greek "dea" which was coined from de (people) and kratos (rule) in the middle of the 5th century BC to denote the political system prevailing at that time. Etymology: Middle French: democratie, from Late Latin: democratia, from dEmos +-kratia-cracy. (source: Encyclopedia Britannica on-line) Democratic government may be defined as government by the people, especially, rule of the majority. In a democratic government, supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. Democratic system is also characterized by the absence of hereditary or arbitrary class distinction or privileges. (source: Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary) In a democratic system, the people (to be more specific, majority of people) decide who among them would rule or govern the country for the next specified period of time. It is also necessary that activities of those people chosen to govern reflect true representation of the desire of the people. So there exist two major components of democracy: one, a free and fair election to choose government who would rule, and two, a system to ensure that the government is accountable to people to guarantee that it acts as per their hopes and aspirations. As per the constitution, Bangladesh is termed as "People's Republic of Bangladesh." Republic as defined in Britannica is "a form of government in which a state is ruled by representatives elected by its populace. The term was originally applied to a form of government in which the leader is periodically appointed under a constitution; it was contrasted with governments in which leadership is hereditary." In Bangladesh, a general election takes place every five years to elect members of parliament which follows formation of a government and a parliament. Parliament functions basically to ensure accountability of government to the people through its elected representatives. Art. 55(3) of the constitution: "The Cabinet shall be collectively responsible to Parliament" stipu-

lates answerability of government to parliament and through parliament to the people. Art. 76(1), (2) & (3) of the constitution describe formation of standing committees for monitoring functioning of individual organs of the government by parliament. However, Art.70 (1) prohibits MPs from differing with party decision without forfeiting their seats in parliament, contradicting the above accountability function of the parliament. The ruling party comprises of majority number of MPs in parliament who are not allowed to perform their due role of ensuring accountability of government. Minority MPs of opposition are numerically too weak to impose any answerability of government functions in parliament. The above gave rise to a dictatorial rule of the prime minister. There is a saying: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The scenario in Bangladesh is that government enjoys absolute power. The system makes the government corrupt and every subsequent government slides down towards absolute corruption. It is well accepted by people in general that since the introduction of the present system of governance in 1991, performance of each subsequent government has been inferior compared to the past, especially in respect of corruption. The present coalition government has probably set the country's governance to the stage where it may be termed that it has been corrupted absolutely. There is little doubt that government's activities do not reflect the desire of the people or their hopes and aspirations. When a government deliberately runs the country for itself only and not for the people and the system allows it to do so, there is practically no democracy in any real sense. It is more or less obvious that this type of government cannot hope for being re-elected by the people in a free and fair election. So, the government has set the stage for a managed election for obtaining a manipulated result in their favour. In case of the present alliance government, from the very first day of taking power the intention had been two-fold: to reap benefit and to take all possible steps so that the next election cannot be made free and fair, with a view to ensure a manipulated win. A free and fair election is where any eligible voter is in a position to

vote as per his or her choice without fear or favour. Voters are not to be subjected to violence or threat of violence and or are not to be allured with illegitimate benefit for deciding to whom to cast their vote. In spite of the fact that Bangladesh is a poor country and the government claimed to have inherited a very vulnerable economy, a super-size cabinet was formed on the first day of taking over. Then that cabinet was used to capture all the institutions of the country down from educational institutions like schools, colleges and universities, hats, bazaars, toll plazas to civil and police administrations at all levels. Government departments, judiciary and even constitutional bodies like Public Service Commission, University Grants Commission, Election Commission, etc. could not escape the onslaught of government occupation. These are done by placing its own people in command positions who are selected not on the basis of merit but purely on party loyalty. Then plunder of public funds and abuse of authority started with the active cooperation of all those occupying forces by manipulating tendering of all purchase and development works and providing all business at inflated cost to a chosen few, giving appointment, leasing of government property or facilities as per parties consideration, violating all rules and ethics. All miscreants were allowed safe sanctuary including share of profit from irregular deals if they side with the ruling party, or else they are sometimes subjected to extra-judicial killings. Political opponents were harassed by implicating them in false criminal cases and are also being put to physical torture, humiliation, and even exterminations by law enforcing agencies. A cell was opened in the Prime Minister's Secretariat to regulate all funds for infrastructural development works and for distribution of relief materials. In the name of PM's commitment or priority those are distributed in a way to bribe people to vote for the ruling party in the next general election. People of a particular area who showed their support by voting for the ruling party candidate in the last election or are now willing to do so are provided more share of that fund, and vice versa. All recruitments, transfers,

postings, promotions, making of OSD and putting on forced retirement have been done to have all the party loyalists in civil service and police and also in election commission jobs to hold key positions during next elections, like returning officers, superintendent of police, officer in charge of police station, election officers, etc. Wives, daughters and other dependents of ruling party beneficiaries are provided with the job of teachers in educational institutions so that they can be appointed as presiding officers, polling officers, etc. to help manipulate the coming election for the ruling party candidate. In addition, all the three important institutions during next general election i.e. presidency, caretaker government (CTG) and Election Commission (EC) have been manipulated to make them partisan. The government party forced one president to resign on grounds of not being partisan and replaced him with a more loyal person. The constitution was amended to enhance the retirement age of the judges of higher judiciary. This act put in place one particular chief justice who was once an office bearer of the ruling party to become the head of the next CTG during election. The opposition raised its voice against the said amendment on that ground, but was brushed aside by the government party. The way chief election commissioner and other election commissioners were recruited and the way they have acted in office so far has failed to satisfy the people about their capability, intension, or neutrality. Lack of confidence in the present EC that a credible election is possible under it is quite widespread. But the government seems adamant not to reform it as demanded by the opposition parties. After ensuring the support of the entire election machinery at the field level and the administration of the country during CTG by putting its own people selected on the basis of loyalty in all the places, the ruling coalition has reason to feel confident that it can achieve a manipulated victory in the next general election. In addition, nobody seems to doubt that the ruling coalition has earned tremendous amounts of black money which would be used in the coming general election. Moreover, an innumerable number of musclemen who were given all protection and prosperity during the entire term of the alliance government would surely not sit idle during the election. The author is a Member of Parliament.

Overdrive



THANONG KHANTHONG, The Nation

HAD Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDRM) leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin not moved as fast as he did to stage a coup on Tuesday, Thaksin Shinawatra would have launched his own coup a day later. Don't be fooled by Thaksin's claim that he stands for democracy. As the political crisis developed to the point of no return concerning whether Thaksin should stay or be booted out, General Sonthi had no choice but to swallow his words about the days of military coups being over. He had been very reluctant to resort to a coup, as he was known not to have any political ambitions. Moreover, he was not known to be an enemy of Thaksin. Although General Sonthi has a good relationship with both Privy Council President General Prem Tinsulanonda and Privy Council member General Surayuth Chulanont, he came to power partly due to a political compromise struck with Thaksin. However, an intelligence report reached General Sonthi's camp stating that there would be bloodshed on Wednesday. The People's Alliance for Democracy had planned to hold a political rally that day at the Royal Plaza in order to force Thaksin out of politics. Had that rally taken place, there would have been clashes between the People's Alliance for Democracy and Thaksin's supporters and blood would have been spilt on Rajdamnoen Avenue. If only Thaksin had promised that he would take a break from politics and allow a period of political reforms to take place, the PAD and other branches of the anti-Thaksin movement would have declared victory. All political confrontations would have subsided. Thaksin could have run for office once the constitution was amended, and he would have been returned to the premier's post,

probably in the latter part of next year. However, Thaksin never considered taking a break from power. Again, don't be fooled by his "taking a break" story -- the idea never crossed his mind. The General Sonthi camp learned that during the PAD rally, Yongyuth Tiypairat and Newin Chidchob were planning to rally their supporters to create an ugly scene at the Royal Plaza. During the ensuing commotion, there would be human casualties. Thaksin would then have stepped in and declared a state of emergency, placing the country under martial law. Now you can understand why he had time to prepare his state of emergency statement and read it at 9.20pm on Channel 9 from his New York hotel room. You can also understand why Yongyuth and Newin are now at the top of this country's most-wanted list and have surrendered themselves to the CDRM for interrogation. Once the situation was under his complete control, Thaksin had planned to fly back in order to declare victory over anti-democratic elements in society. He had a military reshuffle list in hand that would have further consolidated his control over the military. With that accomplished, everything would have been easy. Virtually all institutions in the country would have been under his directive. From his New York hotel, Thaksin was preparing to deliver an address at the UN Assembly. The room instead turned out to be the headquarters from which he attempted to launch a counter-coup and negotiate a political settlement. In New York, he planned to recruit top-notch American political consultants to advise him on his political campaign for the next election, which would have been pushed back from October 15 to some time in November. Thaksin's talk of taking a break from politics was simply lip service.

He told the Thai public he would decide whether to take a break from politics only after his Thai Rak Thai went to the Election Commission to register as candidates. This means Thaksin would have liked His Majesty the King to endorse a new election date before he made his decision. Members of the Thai elite and the PAD, however, would not allow this to happen. If Thaksin were to run in the next election, he would have won. With 12 million votes or so, he would have claimed a democratic majority and he also would have stayed on as prime minister. After that he could rewrite Thai history by turning Thailand into his own regime. General Sonthi had to act fast to head off Thaksin's coup. He staged a military coup on Tuesday, a day before the bloodshed was set to take place. He and Thaksin did have a telephone conversation on Tuesday evening, with Thaksin trying to buy time and negotiate a settlement. He told General Sonthi that if he kept his cool, Thaksin would take a break from politics. He asked Sonthi to wait until he returned from New York so that the two could talk things out and said that he would reschedule his return flight to Bangkok to Wednesday. General Sonthi was polite, but told him that he had no choice, that he had to stage the coup. In the meantime, Thaksin was checking on his military allies, who had control of Bangkok, for the most part. He remained certain that in a military power play, he could still emerge the victor. Major General Prin Suwannathat, commander of the First Infantry Brigade, is a close ally of Thaksin and he holds the most powerful military post in Bangkok. The commanders of the Air Force and the Navy are also good friends of Thaksin. General Sonthi had the support of Lieutenant General Saphrang Kalayanamit of the Third Army, who

had been outspoken in his anti-Thaksin remarks. The Third Army is in charge of all military operations in the North. Another key ally of General Sonthi is Lieutenant General Anupong Phaochinda of the First Infantry Division in Bangkok. Major General Sanit Prommas, the commander of the Second Cavalry Brigade, also came to play an important role in the power play to seize the capital. Troops from Prachin Buri and Lop Buri were also mobilised to the capital to assist in the coup, the decisive outcome of which was ironically the victory of thaharn ban nok (upcountry military). As it turned out, all of Thaksin's military allies, most notably Major General Prin, had been marked out -- they could not move. General Ruengroj Mahasaranont, the supreme commander and a Thaksin ally, was to look after Bangkok once Thaksin had declared martial law. He too was subdued. Chidchai Vanasaitdya and Prommin Lertsuridej were unable to launch any sort of counter effort. Thaksin's wife Khunying Pojaman Shinawatra was supposed to take a 12 am flight to Singapore on Tuesday night. She quickly changed her flight to 9 pm. Well, General Sonthi had to let her off the hook. Twenty-five minutes later, knowing that his wife was safely on an aircraft bound for Singapore, Thaksin read out his state of emergency address from his New York hotel room, effectively sacking General Sonthi. But an hour later, General Sonthi declared a counter-coup to overthrow the Thaksin regime and tear up the Constitution. The rest is history. (c) The Nation. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.