

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

I could not understand what the

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.

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.

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 megacorporations. 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.

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

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 "deia" 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: *democracia*, 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.

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.

The 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 partisan 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 enforcement 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 with a more loyal person.

The constitution was amended 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 had 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

In addition, nobody seems to

doubt that the ruling coalition has

earned tremendous amounts of