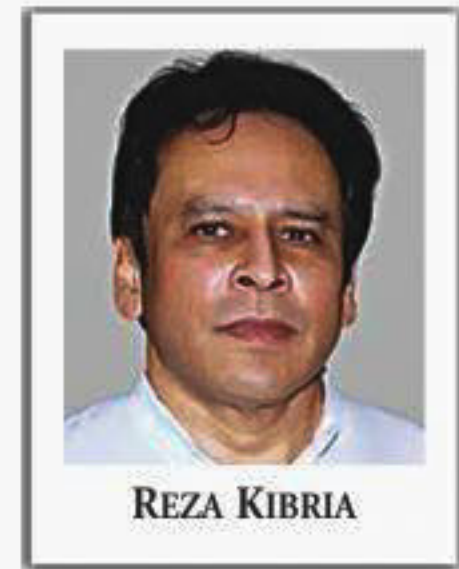


The struggle to restore our values



REZA KIBRIA

THE 2018 election is not just about changing a set of policymakers: It is a possible turning point in the struggle to restore our core values. If those who currently hold power manage to "win" the election, there is genuine fear that all the things that we hold most dear—honour, truth, and justice—may be buried for many years under a pile of lies, deception, and corruption. If the ruling party prevails, the empty shell of a democracy may remain, with the rulers mouthing platitudes about respect for the Constitution (that much distorted document) and democratic ideals while making a mockery of both.

Everyone should be conscious of the pernicious effect of the destruction of our values on our children. What are the lessons they are learning from the reality of politics and governance in Bangladesh? Do we really want them to imbibe the values of those currently holding high office: that might makes right, that if lies are repeated often enough they become "truths", that wealth, however dishonestly acquired, is the only yardstick of "success", that student politics rather than academic achievement or genuine entrepreneurship is the best route to wealth and fame, that servile obeisance to those in power—even when their venality and lack of respect for the law are known to all—is the norm. Merely placing the words like "Respected", "Honourable" in front of the names of those in power does not make them so.

Respect for the truth is eroded when freedom of



speech is systematically undermined through large-scale control, ownership or censorship of the mass media. Manipulation of the social media has been more of a challenge for all autocratic regimes, but the ruling party's vast financial resources have been deployed for this purpose, spreading misinformation. Dealing in lies may seem like an effective instrument of government control, but it has grievously harmed us as a people. Routine lying by top public officials has had the effect of compromising the credibility of all those holding public office. This is regrettable and dangerous as it not only weakens the ability to govern effectively but also makes it more difficult for a government to unite the people to overcome serious national challenges.

The current culture of impunity for most crimes, whether it is murder, stealing public funds, banking fraud and share manipulation, has fostered an adverse incentive structure in our society. When criminal behaviour is rewarded rather than punished, and merit, experience (seniority) and effort fail to get due recognition, a nation is in trouble. The added problem of crony capitalism creates an uneven playing field for legitimate businesspersons who are not willing to accept the culture of bribery afflicting our economy and government.

The corresponding erosion of values such as respect for honesty, integrity, and heroism weakens the entire social fabric, which one day may threaten the stability of our nation. Most

Bangladeshis feel that wealth, position and "connections" are worth more than ability or effort. This general perception that "the system" is unfair demoralises people. As a result, some of the most talented of our people have moved to countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom where ability and hard work are better rewarded. People in Bangladesh now feel that there is no chance of advancement in life unless one is either a member of the corrupt privileged elite or is willing to become a "collaborator" in their crimes. Can this be the basis for a just society? I think not.

Those who make great contributions to our nation must be honoured and properly recognised. The attempts to rewrite our history and excise the names of national heroes must be vigorously opposed. Many people are dismayed that due to political differences the government has sought to denigrate some individuals who achieved greatness due to their activities and heroism during our Liberation War or, in some cases, their contributions to mankind. Is this the way to inspire the next generation to greatness?

As the elections draw nearer the smug certainty of the rulers of this country has given way to shrill denunciations of the Oikyafront as unpatriotic or being involved in some sort of "conspiracy". Patriotism, it has been said, is the last refuge of scoundrels, and the people of this country are intelligent enough to see through false displays of patriotism—particularly from a government that has failed miserably to protect our national interests.

Dr Reza Kibria is an economist and a contestant for the 11th parliamentary election, to be held on December 30, as a candidate of Gonoforum and Jatiya Oikyafront.

LIBERALISM VS NEOLIBERALISM

How it connects the protests storming across Europe



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

SINCE November 17, protesters who have since become known as the "Gilets Jaunes" (Yellow Vests) have been pouring onto the streets of France in huge numbers. Reports suggest that around 70 percent of French people are supportive of the movement,

while French President Emmanuel Macron's approval rating is now down to 20-23 percent.

Members of the movement include those who are on the far-right, the far-left, the right, the left and the centre—meaning that they represent all the different political/ideological beliefs, come from all walks of life, and have between them a host of other clearly identifiable dividing factors.

Yet, bizarrely enough, the Yellow Vests protesters have remained united and unwavering so far, despite the police repeatedly coming down heavily upon them.

What then is the cause behind their solidarity? And is there any connection between the Yellow Vests in France and those popping up across Europe in countries like Belgium, Germany, etc., and all the way across in Canada even?

On the surface, it may appear that there isn't. However, what all these countries have had in common for years are overwhelmingly liberal or neoliberal government policies—as some would define it—but what the great classical-liberal thinkers of the early and mid-twentieth century warned as "faux" liberalism. "Faux" because liberalism, derived from the Latin *liber*, meaning *free*, originally referred to the "philosophy of freedom," according to Bettina Bien Greaves, author and winner of Gary G Schlarbaum Prize for Lifetime Defense of Liberty. In recent decades, however, the term has "come to mean something very different," as it got "taken over...by philosophical socialists" who used it to justify increased government interventionism.

Nowadays, people therefore mistakenly envision a liberal as somebody "who believes in utilising the full force of government" to advance agendas "at the municipal, state, national, and international levels" which,

according to Greaves, almost always ends up restricting the freedom of the individual—and ultimately, the collective. Contrasting this popular present-day liberal viewpoint, Loius M Spadaro, former President of the Institute for Humane studies, also emphasised that "the word 'liberal' has clear and pertinent etymological roots grounded in the ideal of individual liberty"; and said that it was the loss of this idea which posed the greatest threat of totalitarianism and rising inequality.

In his book *Liberalism*, Ludwig Von Mises—arguably one of the greatest classical-liberals of the last century—congruently wrote that liberal "means today a set of ideas and political postulates that in every regard are the opposite of all that liberalism meant to the preceding generations." He argued that the contemporary "self-styled liberal aims at government omnipotence, is a resolute foe of free enterprise, and advocates all round planning by the authorities," thus ignoring the principles of freedom at their very foundations; most often, without realising that they are, in reality, calling for "unlimited discretionary power" to be given to "government agencies, the decisions of which are exempt from judicial review."

Such exemptions, although perhaps

surprising for some, should be most glaringly obvious in the case of the European Union—the centre of European neoliberalism—where no member state has a right to veto EU legislation that is passed by unelected bureaucrats. This means that people within EU countries lack freedom to even elect those who make certain laws they are bound to follow, as well as set policies that their respective governments (regardless of their publicly pledged political leanings) must implement—such as imposing severe austerity measures on people across Europe after the 2008 financial crisis, while simultaneously giving huge amounts of bailout money to banks.

This was in complete opposition to the "reform programme" of history's most famous liberal, Adam Smith, who proposed "to make land, banking and monopolies publicly regulated functions"—in essence arguing for more individual freedom, but greater regulatory oversight of banks and big businesses—according to Professor Michael Hudson. And the reduction in living standards that such policies caused for the majority of people—by transferring wealth to the super-rich from everyone else—is what is at the centre of the protests that are now sweeping across Europe.

The demands of the French Yellow Vests protesters are a reflection of the fact that most French citizens have had enough of the "selective" government interference at the behest of special interests that have, over the years, enriched the few at the cost of the many. Whether consciously or not, the French are rejecting "neoliberalism" (less freedom and more austerity for the majority) for something more akin to classical-liberalism, demanding action that would essentially require the government to reverse the previous wealth transfers to some extent.

These include more tax cuts, support for small businesses, increased social security and increased pensions, all of which took devastating hits because of neoliberal economic policies. They further include end to the austerity policy; to quote the Yellow Vests' message to French MPs: "We are ceasing to repay the debt interest that is declared illegitimate and we are starting to repay the debt without taking the money from the poor and the poorest but by going after the USD 80 billion in tax evasion."

Another of their demands, shared by protesters across Europe and in Canada, includes restriction on immigration and on giving asylum to refugees, while demanding

more humane treatment of refugees who are granted asylum—a seemingly strange contradiction. But interestingly, this, again, is a rejection of neoliberalism, albeit in a peculiar way. Let me explain...

Neoliberal policies, besides serving big banks, have also been a most obedient servant of arms manufacturers who have benefitted greatly from wars, many of which were initiated by western countries—mostly the US but always with support from European countries (or the "neoliberal cabal" in general). Since the vast majority of refugees who are now seeking shelter in Europe are doing so because of those wars, the current unrest could hopefully trigger Europeans to question the neoliberal justification of dropping "bombs for peace" and starting "wars for humanitarian values." Ultimately increasing chances of ending those wars, as that is the only way Europeans' demand concerning immigration and asylum could possibly be met.

In France, the spark that initially got people to protest was the neoliberal trade agreements that nearly destroyed the livelihoods of its farmers. What is interesting about these agreements, which are similar to the TPP, TTIP and TISA, is that they are written by corporate heads in secret—how they are agreed upon is not made public. And the fact that some of these "free trade" agreements are as long as 80,000 pages is again a perfect example of neoliberal hypocrisy, as it shouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the two words, "free trade", surely did not take up 80,000 pages.

It could be that it was through this realisation that the French people came together, setting ideological divisions aside. What is for certain, however, is that their united protest has shaken up the neoliberal elite in France, the aftershocks of which are being felt throughout most of Europe.

The question now is: will this bring down the old guards of neoliberalism in Europe? If it does, will it be replaced by another special interest group? Or will the protesters succeed in returning power to the people?

To achieve the latter, what is most important for the protesters here onwards is to remain vigilant and act with intelligence, lest their movement, too, be hijacked, as was the idea of "liberalism."

Eresh Omar Jamal is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star. His Twitter handle is: @EreshOmarJamal.



A view of the Place de la République as protesters wearing yellow vests gather during a national day of protest in Paris, France, Dec 8, 2018.

PHOTO: STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



DECEMBER 19, 1984

BRITAIN AND CHINA SIGN TO TRANSFER HONG KONG BACK TO CHINA

Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sign the Sino-British Joint Declaration to transfer Hong Kong back to China in 1997

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

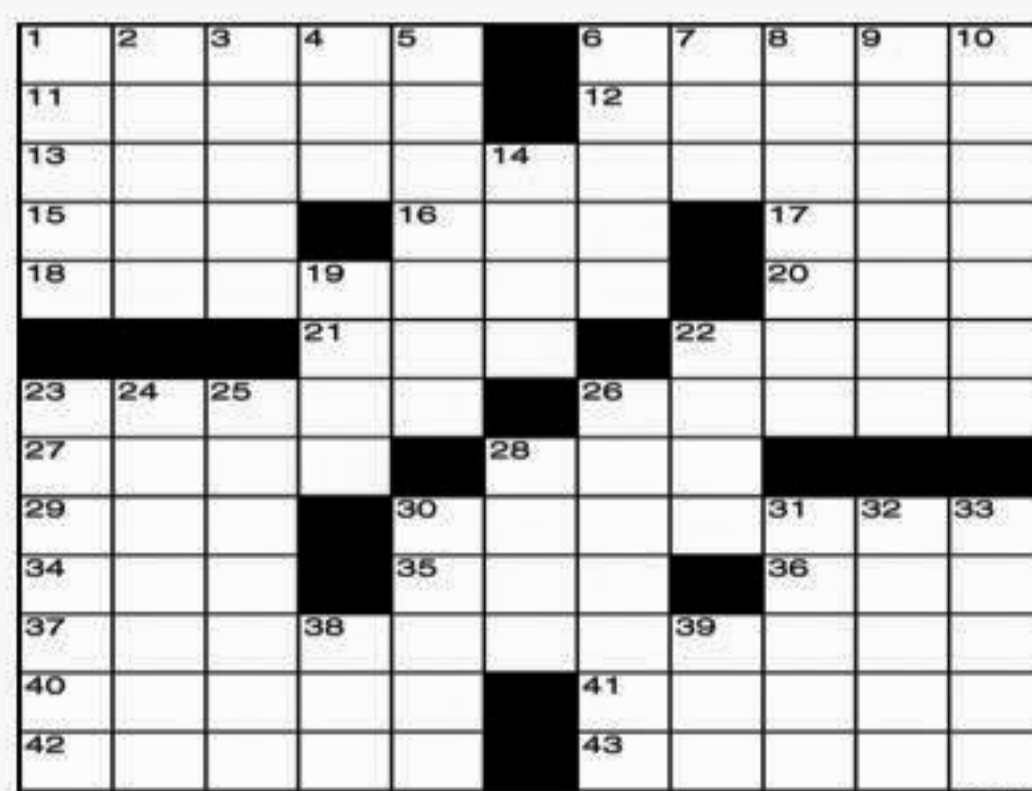
ACROSS

- 1 Gem unit
- 6 Israeli native
- 11 Texas landmark
- 12 Patriot Ethan
- 13 Illinois capital
- 15 Common title starter
- 16 Look upon
- 17 Arts funding org.
- 18 Some time back
- 20 Football's Marino
- 21 Caribou's cousin
- 22 For fear that
- 23 Assesses
- 26 8-Down button
- 27 Yale students
- 28 Stir-fry pan

- 29 On the -- (fleeing)
- 30 Courtroom conference
- 34 Lincoln nickname
- 35 List-shortening abbr.
- 36 Wisdom bringer
- 37 Florida capital
- 40 Some messages
- 41 Use money
- 42 Wise ones
- 43 Bakery buys

DOWN

- 1 Indian social class
- 2 First Greek letter
- 3 Less common
- 4 Paris pal
- 5 Throat masses
- 6 Less dangerous
- 7 Famed boxer
- 8 Kitchen device
- 9 Set free
- 10 Moderate tempo
- 14 Computer whiz
- 19 Sediment
- 22 Leia's brother
- 23 Feels empathy
- 24 Montgomery's state
- 25 Response delay
- 26 Audio download
- 28 Accompanying
- 30 Elite Navy group
- 31 More vile
- 32 Deal maker
- 33 Oboe parts
- 38 Tall tale
- 39 Mud bath site



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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