The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá’í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice feels it is timely to release a compilation on Bahá’í elections as a useful tool to help National Spiritual Assemblies to increase the understanding of the believers regarding the nature and sanctity of these elections, and to prepare themselves for the expected rapid increase in the number of believers. A compilation entitled “The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections” has been prepared by the Research Department, and a copy is enclosed.

The study of this compilation will require careful and sustained planning by the National Spiritual Assemblies and local Spiritual Assemblies, and it should become part of the ongoing program for the deepening of the friends in the fundamentals of Bahá’í administration. The House of Justice urges all National Spiritual Assemblies to discuss the implementation of such a program with the Counsellors, so that the rank and file of the believers, with the whole-hearted support of the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, will appreciate the importance of adhering to Bahá’í principles in this regard, and carry out all Bahá’í elections, on the national as well as the unit and local levels, in an exemplary manner, in full harmony with the spirit of purity and sanctity which must characterize them.

The Universal House of Justice wishes to stress at this point how important it is for all delegates allocated to the National Convention to be elected and the desirability of having all the elected delegates attend this vital national event. It has been noticed that, although attendance at most National Conventions is gradually improving, in several countries every year not all delegates are being elected, and in numerous instances, even when elected, they do not participate either in person or by sending in their ballots.

Be assured of ardent prayers in the Holy Shrines that your resolute efforts to improve the record of devoted and enthusiastic participation in delegate elections, National Conventions and local Assembly elections will attract the assistance and blessings of the divine Concourse.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Universal House of Justice

any administrative agency, must approach their task with absolute detachment and must concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues.” (August 12, 1933, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in “The National Spiritual Assembly,” compiled by the Universal House of Justice. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1972, p. 24)

“The aim should always be so to educate the friends during the year that they consider their participation in Bahá’í elections not only as a right they exercise, but as a spiritual obligation which, when discharged in the proper Bahá’í spirit, contributes to the health and growth of the Bahá’í community.”

the elected representatives of the Bahá’í community, in whatever capacity they may find themselves, may be called upon to pronounce. It must be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá’í elections, when exercising their sacred rights and functions. . . .” (December 25, 1938, written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, published as The Advent of Divine Justice. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1984, p. 26)

From communications written by the Universal House of Justice

“The conditions of limited manpower, of difficulties in traveling and of illiteracy among the local people are found in varying degrees in other countries of the world, and we have always and everywhere urged the National Spiritual Assemblies concerned to guide and teach the friends in proper Bahá’í administrative procedures, not only during the weeks immediately preceding local elections but indeed throughout the year, so that the friends would await the advent of Ridván with anticipation and determine to observe and uphold correct principles of Bahá’í administration.” (From the communication written by the Universal House of Justice, (3)

estimate the unique significance of the institution of the National Spiritual Assembly... Supreme is their position, grave their responsibilities, manifold and arduous their duties. How great the privilege, how delicate the task of the assembled delegates whose function it is to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause! . . . it is incumbent upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience. . . .” (June 3, 1925, to the delegates and visitors of the National Convention of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, published in Bahá’í Administration, pp. 87-88)

“... the elector is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold. . . .” (May 27, 1927, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in Bahá’í Administration, p. 136)

“... I do not feel it to be in keeping with the spirit of the Cause to impose any limitation upon the freedom of the believers to choose those of any race, nationality or temperament who best combine the essential qualifications for membership of administrative institutions. They should disregard personalities and concentrate their attention on the qualities and requirements of office, without prejudice, passion or partiality. The Assembly should be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá’í community. . . .” (In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated August 11, 1933, written on his behalf to an individual believer, published in Bahá’í Institutions. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1973, pp. 71-72)

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With loving Bahá’í greetings,

Universal House of Justice
Department of the Secretariat
December 19, 1989

The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá’í Elections

1. Fostering a spiritual attitude toward elections

From letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

“The conditions of limited manpower, of difficulties in traveling and of illiteracy among the local people are found in varying degrees in other countries of the world, and we have always and everywhere urged the National Spiritual Assemblies concerned to guide and teach the friends in proper Bahá’í administrative procedures, not only during the weeks immediately preceding local elections but indeed throughout the year, so that the friends would await the advent of Ridván with anticipation and determine to observe and uphold correct principles of Bahá’í administration.” (From a letter dated September 24, 1973, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

“The aim should always be so to educate the friends during the year that they consider their participation in Bahá’í elections not only as a right they exercise, but as a spiritual obligation which, when discharged in the proper Bahá’í spirit, contributes to the health and growth of the Bahá’í community.” (From a memorandum dated June 18, 1980, to the International Teaching Center)

2. Qualifications of those to be elected

From letters written by Shoghi Effendi

“The elections not only as a right they exercise, but as a spiritual obligation which, when discharged in the proper Bahá’í spirit, contributes to the health and growth of the Bahá’í community.” (From a letter dated September 24, 1973, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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From letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

“Again I earnestly appeal to every one of you, and renew my only request with all the ardor of my conviction, to make before and during the coming Convention yet another effort, this time more spontaneous and selfless than before, and endeavor to approach your task—the election of your delegates as well as your national and local representatives—with that purity of spirit that can alone obtain our beloved’s most cherished desire.” (February 27, 1923, written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of the East; translated from the Persian)

“On the election day, the friends must wholeheartedly participate in the elections, in unity and amity, turning their hearts to God, detached from all things but Him, seeking His guidance and supplicating His aid and bounty.” (February 27, 1923, written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, published as The Advent of Divine Justice. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1984, p. 26)

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very large numbers of individuals who have the qualities which make them fit for service on Spiritual Assemblies. Of these only a few can be elected at any one time. It is also expected that, through training and experience in the process and spirit of Bahá'í elections, the members of the electorate will have raised their consciousness of their responsibility to vote for only those who satisfy the requirements that the Guardian has outlined. They will, therefore, see it as their continuing duty to familiarize themselves with the character and abilities of those who are active in the community so that, when the time for an election comes, they will already have some idea of the people from among whom they must make their choice." (November 16, 1988, to the International Teaching Center) (18)

'The beloved Guardian has pointed out to us that should we follow the method of the politicians in our Bahá'í elections, misunderstandings and differences will arise, chaos and confusion will ensue, mischief will abound and the confirmations of God will be cut off from that Bahá'í community.'

3. The non-political character of elections

From letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

"Beware, beware lest the foul odor of the parties and peoples of foreign lands in the West, and their pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda—practices which are abhorrent even in name—should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught..." (January 30, 1923, written by Shoghi Effendi to a Spiritual Assembly; translated from the Persian) (19)

"One's vote should be kept confidential. It is not permissible to make any reference whatsoever to individual names. The friends must avoid the evil methods and detestable practices of the politicians. They must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections..." (January 16, 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Spiritual Assembly; translated from the Persian) (20)

"Let them exercise the utmost vigilance so that the individual believer..."

4. The absence of nominations

From letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

"...the Bahá'ís, particularly prominent Bahá'ís, should avoid doing anything which might create a wrong impression and give rise to accusations by uninformed Bahá'ís of electioneering." (April 15, 1986, to a National Spiritual Assembly) (24)
Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith to
April 9, 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Spiritual Assembly; translated from the Persian)

"Let them exercise the utmost vigilance so that the elections are carried out freely, universally and by secret ballot. Any form of intrigue, deception, collusion or compulsion must be stopped and is forbidden." (March 8, 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a local Spiritual Assembly; translated from the Persian)

"The strength and progress of the Bahá’í community depend upon the election of pure, faithful and active souls... Canvassing is abhorred." (April 9, 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a local Spiritual Assembly; translated from the Persian)

From letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

"As you know very well, the method of Bahá’í elections is at complete variance with the methods and practices of elections in political systems. The beloved Guardian has pointed out to us that should we follow the method of the politicians in our Bahá’í elections, misunderstandings and differences will arise, chaos and confusion will ensue, mischief will abound and the confirmations of God will be cut off from that Bahá’í community. In view of these grave warnings, the utmost care must always be exercised so that the purity and spiritual character of Bahá’í elections are maintained and preserved."

"When one sees some inexperienced or immature Bahá’ís indulge in electioneering, either openly or secretly, far from being tempted to imitate them, one should resolutely rise and through proper administrative channels and procedures assist in eradicating such tendencies and cleansing the Bahá’í community from such evil influences." (December 6, 1971, to an individual believer, published in "Letters from the Guardian," compiled by Gertrude M. Garrida. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1973, p. 23)

"In regard to your question about qualifications of delegates and Assembly members: the qualifications which he outlined are really applicable to anyone we elect to a Bahá’í office, whatever its nature. But these are only an indication, they do not mean people who don’t fulfill them cannot be elected to office. We must aim as high as we can. He does not feel the friends should attach so much importance to limitations—such as people perhaps not being able to attend Assembly or Convention meetings, because if they do, then the fundamental concept of everyone being willing to do Bahá’í service on administrative bodies will be weakened, and the friends may be tempted to vote for those who because of independent means or circumstances in their lives are freer to come and go but less qualified to serve." (October 24, 1947, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, published in Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith to the Bahá’í Community of the British Isles. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981, p. 207)
The elections, especially when annual, give the community a good opportunity to remedy any defect or imperfection from which the Assembly may suffer as a result of the actions of its members. Thus a safe method has been established whereby the quality of membership in Bahá'í Assemblies can be continually raised and improved. But, as already stated, the institution of the Spiritual Assembly should under no circumstances be identified with, or be estimated merely through, the personal qualifications of the members that compose it. (November 15, 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, published in “The Local Spiritual Assembly,” pp. 9-10)

There is no minimum number of ballots required for an election to be considered valid, either in the case of a local Spiritual Assembly or of delegates to the National Convention. Nevertheless, it is desirable that every eligible voter take part, and your Assembly should encourage all believers to do so...

In the matter of attendance of delegates at Conventions, the desirability of the friends themselves being self-supporting should be pointed out by the National Assembly. If a delegate cannot pay his own expenses in attending the Convention, the local Assembly or the believers in the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged by the National Assembly to defray such expenses, so that only when funds are unavailable from those sources, the National Assembly is approached to consider offering financial assistance...

The seating of delegates to the Convention, i.e. the right to decide upon the validity of the credentials of the delegates at a given Convention is vested in the outgoing National Assembly, and the right to decide who has the voting privilege is also ultimately placed in the hands of the National Spiritual Assembly...

He considers that the National Spiritual Assembly has every right to examine the ballots if there is some doubt as to the election having been properly conducted. By “preservation” of the ballots is meant that they are preserved in the national files.
5. Participation in elections

From letters written by Shoghi Effendi

“These local Spiritual Assemblies will have to be elected directly by the friends, and every declared believer of 21 years and above, far from standing aloof and assuming an indifferent or independent attitude, should regard his sacred duty to take part, conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation, and the efficient working of his own local Assembly.” (March 12, 1923, to the Baha'is of the West, Japan and Australasia, published in Baha'i Administration, p. 39)

“It would also appear to me unobjectionable to enable and even to require in the last resort such delegates as cannot possibly undertake the journey to the seat of the Baha'i Convention to send their votes. . . . It should, however, be made clear to every elected delegate—who should be continually reminded—that it is a sacred responsibility and admittedly preferable to attend if possible in person the sessions of the Convention, to take an active part in all its proceedings, and to acquaint his fellow-workers on his return with the accomplishments, the decisions, and the aspirations of the assembled representatives of the American believers.” (October 24, 1925, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in Baha'i Administration, pp. 91-92)(31)

“I feel I must reaffirm the vital importance and necessity of the right of voting—a sacred responsibility of which no adult recognized believer should be deprived. . . . This distinguishing right which the believer possesses however does not carry with it nor does it imply an obligation to cast his vote, if he feels that the circumstances under which he lives do not justify or allow him to exercise that right intelligently and with understanding. This is a matter which should be left to the individual to decide for himself according to his own conscience and discretion. . . .” (In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated April 28, 1935, written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Baha'is of North America 1932-1946. Wilmette: Bahá’í Administration, p. 80) (36)

“There is no minimum of ballots required for an election to be considered valid, either in the case of a local Spiritual Assembly or of delegates to the National Convention. Nevertheless, it is desirable that every eligible voter take part, and your Assembly should encourage all believers to do so. . . .” (From a letter dated July 10, 1980, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

(34)

In general, if a delegate to the National Convention is unable to pay his own travel expenses, the believers from the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged by the National Spiritual Assembly to defray such expenses. If funds

Pictured on the front steps of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, are members of the security staff at the Baha'i World Center. With them (front row fourth from right) is ‘Alí Nakhjívání, a member of the Universal House of Justice. The chief responsibility of the Security Department is to serve the House of Justice by protecting and preserving the spiritual and administrative centers of the Faith in Haifa and ‘Akká. In this photograph, which was taken in October 1989, are security guards and members of the administrative staff (in dark suits). Security personnel include many young Baha’is who have come to the World Center from such faraway places as Cameroon, Sweden, Germany, Botswana, France, Australia, Zaire, New Zealand, Austria, Switzerland, England, Guyana and the United States. If you are considering service at the World Center and would like more information about what positions are available and how you may apply, write to the Department of Human Resources, Baha’i National Center, Wilmette, IL 60091, or phone 708-869-9039.