



**Bahá'í
Elections**

A Deepening Theme

Bahá'í Elections

The process of electing and promoting the development of Spiritual Assemblies is an indispensable feature of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. In describing the significance of Spiritual Assemblies, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His Wings. What bounty is there greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.

There is a strong link between the development of Bahá'í administration and the propagation of the Faith. Of course, the Administrative Order is not simply an instrument of teaching; it is the pattern for the future organisation of human affairs. However, it is important for us to recognise that the systematic spread of the Cause depends on the existence of Bahá'í administration. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

Every Local Spiritual Assembly which unitedly strives to grow in maturity and efficiency and encourages its community to fulfil its destiny as a foundation stone of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order can add to a growing ground swell of interest in and eventual recognition of the Cause of God as the sole hope for mankind.

We should bear in mind that although most of us may never have the occasion to serve as a member of an Assembly, we all share in the responsibility for the continued strengthening of this institution. We should each see ourselves as active participants in its ongoing development, rallying behind our Assembly and supporting its efforts to administer the affairs of the community. Concerned with the Assembly's growth, we look upon it with loving eyes and make sure that our own actions reinforce its efforts. The Guardian wrote:

It devolves upon us whose dearest wish is to see the Cause enter upon that promised era of universal recognition and world achievements, to do all in our power to consolidate the foundations of these Assemblies, promoting at the same time a fuller understanding of their purpose and more harmonious cooperation for their maintenance and success.

Discussion:

1. Discuss the relationship between Bahá'í administration and the growth and development of the Cause.
2. Discuss the role of the individual believer in the continued strengthening of Spiritual Assemblies.

The nature of Bahá'í elections distinguishes Bahá'í administration sharply from political processes in the world today. The relationship between a Spiritual Assembly and the individual believer is one based on qualities such as love and tenderness, trustworthiness and justice, forgiveness and mutual respect, in which the individual members of the community support and cherish their Assembly and the Assembly, in turn, genuinely cares for those whom it serves. The Guardian wrote:

...it is necessary that every one should conscientiously take an active part in the election of these Assemblies, abide by their decisions, enforce their decree, and cooperate with them wholeheartedly in their task of stimulating the growth of the Movement throughout all regions.

The members of these Assemblies, on their part, must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal.

The picture drawn by the Guardian of an Assembly and the believers in its community stands in sharp contrast to what we often see in society today. Describing the electoral processes taking place in the broader society, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order.

And in the same message, the House of Justice went on to describe the contrast which is to be found in the Bahá'í approach to electoral processes:

The manner of participation by all adult members of the community in these elections is a distinguishing feature of the System of Bahá'u'lláh; for it is a bounden duty that confers a high privilege upon every Bahá'í to select, as a responsible citizen of the new world being brought into existence, the composition of the institutions having authority over the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In this regard, indifference and neglect on the part of any believer are alien to the spirit of the Cause. The friends must strive ceaselessly to avoid being contaminated with these destructive attitudes, which have inflicted such damage on the integrity and authority of the institutions of a declining world order.

Much responsibility rests on the individual believer to uphold the purity of Bahá'í elections. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

The delegates, as well as the generality of the believers, uphold the purity of Bahá'í elections, scrupulously avoiding electioneering or discussion of who should or should not be a member, even when specific names are not mentioned; for not only does the Guardian prohibit reference to particular personalities, but he also states that "we should refrain from influencing the opinions of others." Collectively, the friends strive to purge themselves of every trace of worldly tendencies - pursuit of personal ambitions, promotion of individuals, contest, and partisanship - which can corrupt and distort an election's spiritual character.

The Universal House of Justice explains further:

The fundamental difference between the system of candidature and the Bahá'í system is that, in the former, individuals, or those who nominate them, decide that they should be placed in positions of authority and put themselves forward to be voted into it. In the Bahá'í system it is the mass of the electorate which makes the decision. If an individual ostentatiously places himself in the public eye with the seeming purpose of getting people to vote for him, the members of the electorate regard this as self-conceit and are affronted by it; they learn to distinguish between someone who is well known as an unintentional result of active public service and someone who makes an exhibition of himself merely to attract votes.

By strengthening Bahá'í administration through wholehearted commitment to Bahá'í electoral processes, we all contribute to the emergence of an alternative model of how society can be organised. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

Through their wholehearted embrace of the Bahá'í electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh — the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

Discussion:

1. Discuss the contrast between a Bahá'í conception of elections and other conceptions held more widely in society.
2. Discuss the spiritual imperatives that characterise Bahá'í elections.

Participating in the Bahá'í electoral process is, of course, a duty enjoined on every believer. We each discharge this duty by taking part annually in the election of the Local Spiritual Assembly that serves our community and in the unit convention held in the area where we reside. A small number of believers in every country are also elected as delegates to vote each year for the National Spiritual Assembly at the National Convention. Further, in countries where applicable, the members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies in a region vote for those who will serve on the Regional Bahá'í Council. We are urged by the Guardian to adopt a particular attitude towards the voting process:

On the election day, the friends must whole-heartedly 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.

Sound preparation is an essential element of the Bahá'í electoral process. Taking active part in the life of the community throughout the year, Bahá'ís use every opportunity to become thoroughly acquainted with one another; thus they are able to consider prayerfully the range of believers for whom they can vote, and then select those who best combine the necessary qualities. The Guardian wrote:

To be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá'í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station.

As in the case with all significant matters, the believers rely heavily on prayer and divine assistance in their approach to the election. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, "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."

Shoghi Effendi emphasises the responsibility placed on the individual believer to make the wisest possible choice at the time of election, stating:

...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.

Regarding the qualifications for membership on an Assembly, The Universal House of Justice wrote:

Among the "necessary qualities" specified by the Guardian are those "of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognised ability and mature experience". With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.

Thought is also given to identifying those with capacities needed to respond to the current needs and opportunities of the Faith. The Guardian wrote:

Due regard must be paid to their actual capacity and present attainments, and only those who are best qualified for membership, be they men or women, and irrespective of social standing, should be elected to the extremely responsible position of a member of the Bahá'í Assembly.

Discussion:

1. Discuss the elements of the process through which an individual believer prepares to participate in the election of a Spiritual Assembly.
2. Discuss the following questions:
 - a. Is it appropriate for the believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected?
 - b. If the believers discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it acceptable for them to mention specific names of individuals that they feel are suitable for service?
 - c. If the believers discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it all right for them to allude to individuals that they feel would be suitable for service, without mentioning any names specifically?

- d. If the believers discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it all right for them to mention specific people as examples of the qualities under discussion?
 - e. Is it all right to discuss the performance of the current members of an Assembly?
 - f. In the exchange of views before an election, is it all right for the believers to discuss deficiencies noted in the functioning of an Assembly?
 - g. Is it all right to consider oneself suitable for service on an Assembly?
 - h. If one feels one is suited for service on an Assembly, is it all right to bring to the attention of others one's qualifications and experience, without actually asking them to vote for oneself?
 - i. If one has personal or professional commitments that would make it difficult to serve on an Assembly, is it acceptable to bring this to the attention of others before an election?
 - j. If one knows something about a believer that would affect his or her suitability for service on an Assembly, does one have the responsibility to make this known to other voters?
 - k. Is it all right for the believers to discuss for whom they voted after the election?
 - l. If one does not feel there are any individuals in the community that one knows well enough, should one not participate in the election?
 - m. If one does not feel that one is familiar enough with other members of the community, should one try to figure out for whom others are voting and follow their example?
 - n. If one does not feel familiar enough with the other members of the community, should one rely upon prayer at the time of the election and do one's best to choose from among the names that come to mind?
3. Below are several factors that might come to one's mind when considering the qualifications of those most suited for service on an Assembly. For each, indicate whether you regard it as "important", "not very important", "irrelevant", or "unfavourable".
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| a. That he or she possesses a reasonable degree of understanding of the teachings of the Faith | f. That he or she contributes, through both word and deed, to an environment conducive to the participation of growing numbers in collective action |
| b. That he or she possesses a good understanding of the messages of the Universal House of Justice regarding the global Plan under way in the Bahá'í world | g. That he or she has a demonstrated ability to consult well with others |
| c. That he or she has a demonstrated ability to translate the teachings into action | h. That he or she is forceful in consultation |
| d. That he or she has a demonstrated ability to help others translate the teachings into action | i. That he or she constantly puts forward suggestions about projects the community should undertake |
| e. That his or her life reflects a degree of coherence between belief and action | j. That he or she is prone to conflict |
| | k. That he or she is able to acknowledge when he or she has made a mistake |
| | l. That he or she has the ability to build unity in the community |

- m. That he or she has long standing experience in the teaching field
- n. That he or she has served in an administrative capacity before
- o. That he or she has been a Bahá'í for many years
- p. That he or she shares the same concerns about the Bahá'í community that you have
- q. That he or she often expresses criticism about the way the Bahá'í community is administered
- r. That he or she is familiar with the progress of the Bahá'í community worldwide
- s. That he or she is well travelled
- t. That he or she has been exposed to other cultures
- u. That he or she is entertaining when addressing an audience
- v. That he or she is poised when addressing an audience
- w. That he or she is charismatic
- x. That he or she holds a high ranking position in society
- y. That he or she is highly educated
- z. That he or she is well dressed
- aa. That he or she is wealthy

Clearly there are many other factors that may come to a person's mind when considering the qualifications of those suited for service on an Assembly. You may wish to think of a few more and discuss them with your group.

