The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections

A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department
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1. Fostering a Spiritual Attitude towards Elections

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

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.

(27 February 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the East—translated from the Persian) **[1]**

Again I earnestly appeal to every one of you, and renew my only request with all the ardour of my conviction, to make before and during the coming Convention yet another effort, this time more spontaneous and selfless than before, and endeavour 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....

(23 February 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" [rev. ed.], (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 65) **[2]**

In discharging this sacred function no influence whatever, no pressure from any quarter, even though it be from the National Assembly, should under any circumstances affect their views or restrict their freedom. The delegates must be wholly independent of any administrative agency, must approach their task with absolute detachment and must concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues.

(12 August 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) **[3]**

Such a rectitude of conduct must manifest itself, with ever-increasing potency, in every verdict which 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 electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions....

(25 December 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) **[4]**

From Communications Written by the Universal House of Justice

The conditions of limited manpower, of difficulties in travelling 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 Riḍván with anticipation and determine to observe and uphold correct principles of Bahá'í administration.

(From a letter dated 24 September 1973 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[5]**

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 18 June 1980 to the International Teaching Centre) **[6]**

2. Qualifications of Those to be Elected

From Letters Written by Shoghi Effendi

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.

(In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated 27 December 1923 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma, published in "Dawn of a New Day" (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, [1970]), p. 4) **[7]**

Let us recall His explicit and often repeated assurances that every Assembly elected in that rarefied atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is in truth appointed of God, that its verdict is truly inspired, that one and all should submit to its decision unreservedly and with cheerfulness.

(23 February 1924 to the Bahá'ís of America, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 65) **[8]**

It would be impossible at this stage to ... overestimate 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....

(3 June 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) **[9]**

...the elector ... is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold....

(27 May 1927 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 136) **[10]**

...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 11 August 1933 written on his behalf to an individual believer, published in "Bahá'í Institutions" (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), pp. 71-72) **[11]**

If any discrimination is at all to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but rather in favour of the minority, be it racial or otherwise.... ...every organised community, enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it. So great and vital is this principle that in such circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community....

(25 December 1938, published as "The Advent of Divine Justice", p. 35) **[12]**

The electors ... must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership....

(1 July 1943 to the National Spiritual Assembly of Persia –translated from the Persian) **[13]**

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

...concerning the qualifications of the members of the Spiritual Assembly: there is a distinction of fundamental importance which should be always remembered in this connection, and this is between the Spiritual Assembly as an institution, and the persons who compose it. These are by no means supposed to be perfect, nor can they be considered as being *inherently* superior to the rest of their fellow-believers. It is precisely because they are subject to the same human limitations that characterize the other members of the community that they have to be elected every year. The existence of elections is a sufficient indication that Assembly members, though forming part of an institution that is divine and perfect, are nevertheless themselves imperfect. But this does not necessarily imply that their judgement is defective....

(15 November 1935 to individual believers, published in "The Local Spiritual Assembly", compiled by the Universal House of Justice (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 9) **[14]**

A believer has the right to vote for himself during the election time, if he conscientiously feels the urge to do so. This does not necessarily imply that he is ambitious or selfish, for he might conscientiously believe that his qualifications entitle him to membership in a Bahá'í administrative body, and he might be right. The essential, however, is that he should be sincere in his belief, and should act according to the dictates of his conscience. Moreover, membership in an Assembly or committee is a form of service, and should not be looked upon as a mark of inherent superiority, or a means for self-praise.

(27 March 1938 to an individual believer, published in "Dawn of a New Day", pp. 200-201) **[15]**

There is no objection in principle to an Assembly being re-elected, whether in toto or in part, provided the members are considered to be well qualified for that post. It is individual merit that counts. Novelty or the mere act of renewal of elections are purely secondary considerations. Changes in Assembly membership would be welcome so far as they do not prejudice the quality of such membership. Once Assembly elections are over, the results should be conscientiously and unquestionably accepted by the entire body of the believers, not *necessarily* because they represent

the voice of truth or the will of Bahá'u'lláh, but for the supreme purpose of maintaining unity and harmony in the Community....

(10 July 1939 to an individual believer, published in "Directives of the Guardian", compiled by Gertrude Garrida (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973), p. 23) **[16]**

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 fulfil 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.

(24 October 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) **[17]**

From a Memorandum Written by the Universal House of Justice

Also relevant to this question is the statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in one of His Tablets to the effect that a voter should make his choice from among those whose good name has been widely diffused.

Inevitably, in any form of election, worthy individuals fail to be elected simply because they are not widely known. This is true in the system that uses nominations and electioneering as it will be in the Bahá'í system. However, this is not the point. Election to an Assembly, from a Bahá'í point of view, is not a right that people are entitled to, or an honour to which they should aspire; it is a duty and responsibility to which they may be called. The purpose is that those who are elected to an Assembly should be the most worthy for this service; this does not and cannot mean that all those who are worthy will be elected.

It is expected that in the future ... there will be 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.

(16 November 1988 to the International Teaching Centre) **[18]**

3. The Non-Political Character of Elections

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Beware, beware lest the foul odour 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....

(30 January 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...

(16 January 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 elections are carried out freely, universally and by secret ballot. Any form of intrigue, deception, collusion and compulsion must be stopped and is forbidden.

(8 March 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly — translated from the Persian) **[21]**

The strength and progress of the Bahá'í community depend upon the election of pure, faithful and active souls.... Canvassing is abhorred....

(9 April 1932, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly — translated from the Persian) **[22]**

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 arise and through proper administrative channels and procedures assist in eradicating such tendencies and cleansing the Bahá'í community from such evil influences.

(6 December 1971 to an individual believer) **[23]**

...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.

(15 April 1986 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[24]**

4. The Absence of Nominations

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others....

(14 May 1927, written by Shoghi Effendi to the Spiritual Assembly of Akron, Ohio, published in the United States "Bahá'í News Letter", no. 18 (June 1927), p. 9) **[25]**

...the practice of nomination, so detrimental to the atmosphere of a silent and prayerful election, is viewed with mistrust inasmuch as it gives the right to the majority of a body that, in itself, under the present circumstances, often constitutes a minority of all the elected delegates, to deny that God-given right of every elector to vote only in favour of those whom he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates....

(27 May 1927, written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 136) **[26]**

As to the practice of nomination in Bahá'í elections, this the Guardian firmly believes to be in fundamental disaccord with the spirit which should animate and direct all elections held by the Bahá'ís, be they of a local or national character and importance. It is, indeed, the absence of such a practice that constitutes the distinguishing feature and the marked superiority of the Bahá'í electoral methods over those commonly associated with political parties and factions. The practice of nomination, being thus contrary to the spirit of Bahá'í Administration, should be totally discarded by all the friends. For otherwise the freedom of the Bahá'í elector in choosing the members of any Bahá'í Assembly will be seriously endangered, leaving the way open for the domination of personalities. Not only that, but the mere act of nomination leads eventually to the formation of parties—a thing which is totally alien to the spirit of the Cause.

In addition to these serious dangers, the practice of nomination has the great disadvantage of killing in the believer the spirit of initiative, and of self-development. Bahá'í electoral procedures and methods have, indeed, for one of their essential purposes the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of maintaining his full freedom in the elections, they make it incumbent upon him to become an active and well-informed member of the Bahá'í community in which he lives. 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 of his fellow-believers, to keep in touch 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. And since the practice of nomination hinders the development of such qualities in the believer, and in addition leads to corruption and partisanship, it has to be entirely discarded in all Bahá'í elections.

(4 February 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, published in "The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria", vol. 1 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982), pp. 67-68) **[27]**

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.

(15 November 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, published in "The Local Spiritual Assembly", pp. 9-10) **[28]**

From a Memorandum Written by the Universal House of Justice

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.

(16 November 1988 to the International Teaching Centre) **[29]**

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 it his sacred duty to take part, conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation, and the efficient working of his own local Assembly.

(12 March 1923 to the Bahá'ís of the West, Japan and Australasia, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 39) **[30]**

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 Bahá'í 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.

(24 October 1925 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í 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 28 April 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 Bahá'ís of North America 1932-1946" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947), pp. 3-4) **[32]**

From Communications Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

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….

(From a letter dated 9 February 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, published in "Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File", compiled by Helen Hornby (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 143) **[33]**

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 10 July 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 are unavailable from this source, the National Spiritual Assembly may be approached to consider offering financial assistance. The National Assembly is not under obligation to do so. It may choose to pay only a portion of the travel expenses of a delegate, such as the return portion of the transportation cost….

The Counsellors should not hesitate to draw the attention of the National Spiritual Assembly to the need to foster good attendance of delegates at the National Convention, and to offer advice on the merits of provision of financial assistance to delegates. In addition, the Counsellors should emphasize to the community, through the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, the value of believers in each unit area providing financial help to the delegate they have elected to participate in the deliberations of the National Convention. The vital responsibility of each delegate to cast his ballot by mail, if he is unable to attend in person, should also be emphasized.

(From a memorandum dated 14 November 1988 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre) **[35]**

6. The Role of the National Spiritual Assembly

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

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….

(29 January 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration", p. 80) **[36]**

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.

(14 March 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, published in "Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, 1923-1957" (Sydney: National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, 1970), p. 66) **[37]**

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