

The Universal House of Justice

8 February 1970

To National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

For long centuries the African Continent, or rather that great part of it which lies south of the Sahara, remained relatively isolated from the rest of the world, untroubled and scarcely touched by the surging conflicts of the nations to the north and east. Now, rapidly emerging into the main stream of international interest, the African peoples, who were compared by Bahá'u'lláh to the black pupil of the eye through which "the light of the spirit shineth forth," are being swept by the heady enthusiasms of new-found independence, torn by the conflicting forces of divergent political interests, their vision obscured by the haze of materialism and the dust of nationalistic passions and age-old tribal rivalries.

In the midst of the storm and stress of the battles of selfish interests being waged about them, stand the followers of the Most Great Name, their sight attracted to the rising Sun of God's Holy Cause, their hearts welded together in a bond of true unity with all the children of men, and their voices raised in a universal song of praise to the Glory of God and the oneness of mankind, calling on their fellowmen to forget and forgo their differences and join them in obedience and service to God's Holy Command in this Day.

The Army of the Cause, advancing at the bidding of the Lord, to conquer the hearts of men, can never be defeated, but its rate of advance can be slowed down by acts of unwisdom and ignorance on the part of its supporters. We are writing you this letter to help in clarifying some of the issues that have, in the past, blurred the vision of some of the believers, and caused them to commit errors of judgment which have retarded the progress of the Faith in their countries.

One of these issues, and by far the most important, is a lack of appreciation of the implications of the Bahá'í principle of noninterference in political affairs. We find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have given us clear and convincing reasons why we must uphold this principle. These reasons are summarized below for the study and deepening of the friends. It is our hope that these observations will not only help the friends to intelligently and radiantly follow the holy teachings on this matter, but will help them to explain the Bahá'í attitude to those who may question its wisdom and usefulness:

The Faith of God is the sole source of salvation for mankind today. The true cause of the ills of humanity is its disunity. No matter how perfect may be the machinery devised by the leaders of men for the political unity of the world, it will still not provide the antidote to the poison sapping the vigor of present-day society. These ills can be cured only through the instrumentality of God's Faith. There are many well-wishers of mankind who devote their efforts to relief work and charity and to the material well-being of man, but only Bahá'ís can do the work which God most wants done. When we devote ourselves to the work of the Faith we are doing a work which is the greatest aid and only refuge for a needy and divided world.

The Bahá'í Community is a worldwide organization seeking to establish true and universal peace on earth. If a Bahá'í works for one political party to overcome another it is a negation of the very spirit of the Faith. Membership in any political party, therefore, necessarily entails repudiation of some or all of the principles of peace and unity proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated: "Our party is God's party—we don't belong to any party."

If a Bahá'í were to insist on his right to support a certain political party, he could not deny the same degree of freedom to other believers. This would mean that within the ranks of the Faith, whose primary mission is to unite all men as one great family under God, there would be Bahá'ís opposed to each other. Where, then, would be the example of unity and harmony which the world is seeking?

If the institutions of the Faith, God forbid, became involved in politics, the Bahá'ís would find themselves arousing antagonism instead of love. If they took one stand in one country, they would be bound to change the views of the people in another country about the aims and purposes of the Faith. By becoming involved in political disputes, the Bahá'ís instead of changing the world or helping it, would themselves be lost and destroyed. The world situation is so confused and moral issues which were once clear have become so mixed up with selfish and battling factions, that the best way Bahá'ís can serve the highest interests of their country and the cause of true salvation for the world, is to sacrifice their political pursuits and affiliations and wholeheartedly and fully support the divine system of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Faith is not opposed to the true interests of any nation, nor is it against any party or faction. It holds aloof from all controversies and transcends them all, while enjoining upon its followers loyalty to government and a sane patriotism. This love for their country the Bahá'ís show by serving its well-being in their daily activity, or by working in the administrative channels of the government instead of through party politics or in diplomatic or political posts. The Bahá'ís may, indeed are encouraged to, mix with all strata of society, with the highest authorities and with leading personalities as well as with the mass of the people, and should bring the knowledge of the Faith to them; but in so doing they should strictly avoid becoming identified, or identifying the Faith, with political pursuits and party programs.

So vital is this principle of noninterference in political matters, which must govern the acts and words of Bahá'ís in every land, that Shoghi Effendi has written that “Neither the charges which the uninformed and the malicious may be led to bring against them, nor the allurements of honors and rewards” would ever induce the true believers to deviate from this path, and that their words and conduct must proclaim that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh “are actuated by no selfish ambition, that they neither thirst for power, nor mind any wave of unpopularity, of distrust or criticism, which a strict adherence to their standards might provoke.”

“Difficult and delicate though be our task,” he continues, “the sustaining power of Bahá'u'lláh and of His Divine guidance will assuredly assist us if we follow steadfastly in His way, and strive to uphold the integrity of His laws. The light of His redeeming grace, which no earthly power can obscure, will if we persevere, illuminate our path, as we steer our course amid the snares and pitfalls of a troubled age, and will enable us to discharge our duties in a manner that would redound to the glory and the honor of His blessed Name.”

The second issue which causes difficulties for the African friends in these days is the matter of tribalism. As Bahá'ís they are convinced that mankind is one and must be viewed as one entity, yet, as members of their respective tribes, they find themselves expected by their non-Bahá'í brothers to give their first loyalty to, and even aggressively pursue the interests of their tribe. They live, moreover, in an atmosphere which is only too often one of mistrust, fear and even hatred against the members of other tribes.

The Bahá'í attitude in such a situation is clearly set forth in the Writings. As Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity. The followers of the Faith, the Guardian has clearly stated, “will not hesitate to subordinate every particular interest, be it personal, regional or national, to the overriding interests of the generality of mankind, knowing full well that in a world of interdependent peoples and nations the

advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no lasting result can be achieved by any of the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are neglected.”

In further elucidating this theme he has written: “Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the worldwide Law of Bahá’u’lláh.... It does not ignore nor does it attempt to suppress the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity ...”

In these days when tribal tensions are increasing in Africa the friends should be vigilant lest any trace of prejudice or hatred, God forbid, may enter their midst. On the contrary, they should endeavor to bring into the Faith an ever larger representation of the various tribes in each country, and through complete lack of prejudice as well as through the love that Bahá’ís have for each other and for their non-Bahá’í neighbors, demonstrate to their countrymen what the Word of God can do. They will thus provide, for the scrutiny of the leaders and rulers of their countries, a shining example of a unified community, working together in full concord and harmony, demonstrating a hope that is attainable, and a pattern worthy to be emulated.

To discriminate against any tribes because they are in a minority is a violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh. As followers of God’s Holy Faith it is our obligation to protect the just interests of any minority element within the Bahá’í community. In fact in the administration of our Bahá’í affairs, representatives of minority groups are not only enabled to enjoy equal rights and privileges, but they are even favored and accorded priority. Bahá’ís should be careful never to deviate from this noble standard, even if the course of events or public opinion should bring pressure to bear upon them.

The principles in the Writings are clear, but usually it is when these principles are applied that questions arise. In all cases where the correct course of action is not clear believers should consult their National Spiritual Assembly who will exercise their judgment in advising the friends on the best course to follow.

It is the hope and prayer of the Universal House of Justice that National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa will, in full collaboration with the Continental Boards of Counselors and Auxiliary Boards in their areas, act as loving shepherds to the divine flock in that mighty Continent, protect the friends from the evil influences surrounding them, guide them in the true and right path, and assist them to attain a continuously deeper understanding, a firmer conviction and a more consuming love for the Cause they are so devotedly seeking to promote and serve.

With loving Bahá’í greetings,

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]