THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

27 April 2017

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of 31 January 2017 in which you seek guidance on the latitude Bahá'ís have to engage in social action and public discourse, particularly in relation to the principle of non-involvement in political affairs. We have been asked to convey the following.

Your heartfelt desire to apply the principles of the Faith to address the ills of society is warmly acknowledged. The House of Justice agrees with many of your thoughtful points and wishes to provide some additional ideas for your consideration.

As you are no doubt well aware, in discussing the principle of non-involvement in politics, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'ís are to "refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions." In political controversies, they "should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests" of their "world-wide Fellowship". They are called to "avoid the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician". And they are to "rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world." Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions should not take positions on the political decisions of governments, including disputes among governments of different nations; should refrain from becoming involved in debates surrounding any political controversy; and should not react, orally or otherwise, in a manner that could be taken as evidence of support for a partisan political stance. It is not for a Bahá'í, in offering social commentary, to vilify specific individuals, organizations, or governments or to make attacks on them. Indeed, the Guardian specifically cautioned the friends against referring to political figures in their public remarks, whether in criticism or support.

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá enjoined Bahá'ís to be obedient to the government of their land. Unity, order, and cooperation are the basis for sound and lasting change. Even civil disobedience, in the form of a conscious decision to violate the law to effect social change, is not acceptable for Bahá'ís—whatever merit it appears to have had in particular political settings. Ultimately, obedience to government has a bearing on the unity of the Bahá'í community itself. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi stated that individual Bahá'ís should not become immersed in the "faulty systems of the world" or judge their government as "just or unjust—for each believer would be sure to hold a different viewpoint, and within our own Bahá'í fold a hotbed of dissension would spring up and destroy our unity." These considerations, however, do not imply an endorsement of the actions or policies of one's government. As Shoghi Effendi explained in another letter written on his behalf: "The principle of obedience to government does not place any Bahá'í under the obligation of identifying the teachings of his Faith with the political program enforced by the government. For such an identification, besides being erroneous and contrary to both the spirit as well as the form of the Bahá'í message, would necessarily create a conflict within the conscience of every loyal believer."

The principles of non-involvement in politics and obedience to government, far from being obstacles to social change, are aspects of an approach set forth in the Bahá'í writings to implement effective remedies for and address the root causes of the ills afflicting society. This

approach includes active involvement in the life of society as well as the possibility of influencing and contributing to the social policies of government by all lawful means. Indeed, service to others and to society is a hallmark of the Bahá'í life. And Shoghi Effendi has explained that "the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá'u'lláh, be safely embodied therein." The way in which Bahá'ís seek to effect social change is described in the 2 March 2013 message of the House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran. A copy of that message is enclosed for your study.

There can be no question then that Bahá'ís are committed to efforts toward social transformation. "Much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party," Shoghi Effendi, through his secretary, cautioned, "they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part, with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings—such as, for instance, better race relations." This involvement in activities for social reform and well-being can in certain circumstances even extend to taking part in demonstrations. A letter written on the Guardian's behalf indicated that he did not see any objection to Bahá'í students taking part as Bahá'ís in a protest concerning racial prejudice on campus, since "there was nothing political about it" and "he does not see how they could remain indifferent when fellow-students were voicing our own Bahá'í attitude on such a vital issue and one we feel so strongly about." Thus, individual Bahá'ís are free to participate in those efforts and activities, such as peaceful rallies, that uphold constructive aims in consonance with the Bahá'í teachings, for example, the advancement of women, the promotion of social justice, the protection of the environment, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, and the safeguarding of human rights.

In deciding whether it would be appropriate for Bahá'ís to participate in particular public activities, a crucial distinction should be drawn between those events that have a partisan political character and those that do not. A further distinction can be drawn between those activities that are fully in keeping with the teachings and that can be supported explicitly by Bahá'í institutions and those where the situation is less clear, in which Bahá'í institutions should not participate but in which individuals can be given some latitude to make a personal decision to take part, without in any way implying that they are representing the Faith directly by their choice. If a believer harbors any doubt as to the appropriateness of involvement with a particular event or approach, guidance should be sought from the National Spiritual Assembly, which is in the best position to evaluate the specific circumstances and is responsible for making the final determination on such questions.

Beyond this clarification of basic principles, there are other important considerations. Too often political goals, even when pursued in the name of justice, are a chimera, for the fundamental partisanship in contemporary political life means policies are often implemented without building consensus and consequently seeds of discontent and continuing political struggle are sown. Conflict and contention ultimately yield more conflict and contention. Eliminating social problems, rather than merely ameliorating them to an extent, requires unity of thought as well as action, an open heart as well as an open hand—conditions which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is intended to bring about.

For many decades following the second great war of the twentieth century, humanity moved, with fits and starts, toward the promise of a united world. The failure to complete the project of the unification of nations, however, left gaps in relations in which supranational problems could fester and threaten the security and well-being of peoples and states, leading to a recrudescence of prejudice, of divers expressions of factionalism, and of virulent nationalism that are the very negation of Bahá'u'lláh's message of peace and oneness.

One of the current features of the process of the disintegration of the old world order manifest in the United States is the increasing polarization and fragmentation that has come to characterize

so much of political and social life. There has been a hardening of viewpoints, increased incivility, an unwillingness to compromise or even entertain differing perspectives, and a tendency to automatically take sides and fight. Science and religion, two great lights that should guide human progress, are often compromised or swept aside. Matters of moral principle and questions of justice are reduced to intractable liberal or conservative viewpoints, and the country is increasingly divided along divergent lines. In this context, the friends have to hold steadfastly to the Bahá'í teachings and consultative methods and not allow their pursuit of noble aims and high aspirations to draw them into one side or the other of fruitless debates and contentious processes.

In their reflections on how to contribute to the betterment of the world, Bahá'ís will undoubtedly recognize that demonstrations are not the only, or even the most effective, means available to them. Rather, they can learn and grow in capacity over time to help their fellow citizens to frame concerns in a way that rises above fissures, to share views in a manner that transcends divisive approaches, and to create and participate in spaces to work together in the quest to enact solutions to the problems that bedevil their nation. As Bahá'u'lláh stated: "Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation." In this light, justice is indeed essential to resist the vain imaginings and idle fancies of social and political machinations, to see reality with one's own eyes, and to identify the requirements for an equitable social order. But then unity is essential—forged through consultative processes, including action and reflection—to achieve the power required for positive social change.

Unfortunately, sometimes when approaching such important and deeply felt matters, the friends can create dichotomies where none exist. Thus, for example, it is contended that one must choose between either non-involvement in politics or social action; either teaching the Faith or involvement with society; either the institute process and the community-building activities it fosters or a program for race unity; and so on. Such apparent conflicts can be greatly dissipated by keeping in mind Shoghi Effendi's advice, conveyed in a letter written on his behalf, to conceive of the teachings as one great whole with many facets. "Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory," the same letter indicated, "and yet it is all one if you carry the thought through to the end." A careful reading of the Bahá'í writings and the guidance of the House of Justice can clarify how two matters that appear to be in tension with one another are coherent once the concepts and principles that connect them are understood. Particular circumstances in a locality, timeliness, and the periodic need for focus also have a bearing on such issues.

In a recent letter written on its behalf, the House of Justice explained to your National Assembly that the scope of the Five Year Plan offers ample opportunities for believers to address the social concerns of their communities and society as a whole. The Plan's activities for sustained growth and community building lie at the heart of a broad scheme for social transformation. The friends are called to three simultaneous, overlapping, and coherent areas of action: community-building efforts in clusters; projects and activities for social action; and involvement in the discourses of society, whether in neighborhoods or in personal or professional associations. An assessment of the efforts of Bahá'ís across the United States will reveal that there is already an army of believers working in all strata of society to promote the Bahá'í teachings and combat the spiritual and social ills afflicting their country. As the learning process that has proven to be so effective in the expansion and consolidation work worldwide is increasingly employed in all endeavors, the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to apply Bahá'u'lláh's healing remedy to achieve profound and lasting change will become ever more pronounced, assisting the nation along the path of its destiny.

Rest assured of the supplications of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh may bless your efforts to be a promoter of unity and justice.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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