

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

1 December 2019

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The troubling conditions facing the world's peoples and the persistent problems caused by disunity within and between nations have, as you know, been a prominent theme in the messages of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'ís, of course, are ever mindful of the state of the world. The well-being of humanity and its peace and tranquillity are the constant desire of all those who have taken to heart Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to "be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in". It is abundantly clear, moreover, that the longing of the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world and to participate constructively in the life of society is in no way contradicted by their non-involvement in politics. While consciousness of the hardships afflicting so many strengthens a commitment to fundamental social change, political activity by Bahá'ís would only dissipate the community's energies and fail to bring about this change. It must arise from the spiritual transformation of society. These concepts were explored by the House of Justice much more fully in its message dated 2 March 2013 to the Bahá'ís of Iran, a message which many communities have found it useful to revisit from time to time. We have been asked to convey to you some additional points on a closely related topic, and this letter may be shared with the friends in whatever manner you deem most appropriate.

One conspicuous symptom of society's deepening malaise is the steady descent of public discourse into greater rancour and enmity, reflecting entrenched partisan points of view. A prevalent feature of such contemporary discourse is how political disagreements rapidly degenerate into invective and ridicule. However, what particularly differentiates the present age from those that preceded it is how so much of this discourse occurs in full view of the world. Social media and related communication tools tend to give the greatest exposure to all that is controversial, and the very same tools allow individuals, in an instant, to disseminate more widely whatever catches their attention and to register their support or opposition to various sentiments, whether explicitly or tacitly. The unparalleled ease with which a person can join in such public debate and the nature of the technology make momentary lapses of judgement and incautious actions more likely and their residue more enduring.

This holds particular implications for Bahá'ís, who know well that the principles of their Faith require them to refrain from involvement in political controversies and conflicts of all kinds. "Speak thou no word of politics" was the counsel of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to one believer, adding, "Except to speak well of them, make thou no mention of the earth's kings, and the worldly governments thereof." Shoghi Effendi warned against allowing our vision of the Cause to be clouded "by the stain and dust of worldly happenings, which, no matter how glittering and far-reaching in their immediate effects, are but the fleeting shadows of an imperfect world". While the importance of keeping at a distance from all politically divisive issues is well known to the friends, their engagement with pressing social issues, motivated by a commendable and sincere wish to be of service to those around them, can present them with difficult situations. An unexpected development can turn an uncontroversial issue into one that divides people along partisan lines, and some of the same unhealthy modes of expression that are common to the political sphere can transfer into other areas of discourse. Especially in the uninhibited realm of social media, wrongs—both real and imagined—are quickly magnified, and a variety of feelings are easily stirred: righteous indignation perhaps, or a desire to promote one's point of view, or an eagerness to be seen as the source of new information. Much that is taken to be harmless, or even well-intentioned, is, on closer examination, serving to deepen social divides, fuel differences between

opposing groups, and perpetuate disagreements, driving away possibilities for consensus and the search for solutions. If one person's contribution seems provocative or objectionable, reacting to it may have the effect of unwittingly strengthening and increasing the exposure of the original sentiment, and exacerbating matters. The followers of the Blessed Beauty must be conscious and conscientious users of any technology they decide to utilize and must apply insight and spiritual discipline. They should look to the lofty standards of the Cause to guide them at all times in the way they express themselves. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world.

It will be apparent that the precepts the friends observe in the course of their general interactions with those around them must also characterize, sometimes even more scrupulously, their communication carried out via social media. These precepts include the prohibition on backbiting, the counsel to see the world with their own eyes and not through the eyes of others, the need to uphold the oneness of humanity and avoid a mind-set of "us" and "them", and the principles of consultation and the necessary decorum associated with it.

The friends will occasionally come across instances when their fellow believers have made comments or circulated the comments of others in ways that seem unwise, or imprudent, when judged against the standards set out in the Bahá'í Writings. It would be wrong, when encountering postings of this kind, to conclude that such behaviour must therefore be unobjectionable, condoned, or even encouraged. Not infrequently, Bahá'í institutions have had to counsel individuals about their actions online, although wherever possible they do so with discretion, out of respect for the dignity of the persons in question.

One example among many areas in which the considerations set out above are relevant is the discussion on social media of matters pertaining to Iran. As will be readily appreciated, this is an area of particular sensitivity, and therefore the friends need to be especially on their guard. Rash statements made online could endanger the believers in that land or unwittingly provide the enemies of the Cause with the means to misrepresent the Bahá'ís. Observing strict caution in this respect is essential for the protection of the sorely tried community in Iran.

In this connection, the House of Justice has asked us to convey an additional point to the Persian believers who reside outside the Cradle of the Faith. It is understandable that these friends feel a strong personal concern for the well-being of their fellow Bahá'ís in Iran and for the future of that sacred land. Nevertheless, they are urged to bear in mind that, regardless of their land of origin, their primary obligation ought to be to the progress of the Faith in the land in which they now dwell. Indeed, over the course of the Faith's history, the contributions made by Persian Bahá'ís to the teaching work on every continent are too many to recount, and the House of Justice rejoices when these friends direct their efforts towards advancing the Five Year Plan in the places where they reside. This must be their chief object; striving for such a goal is what will bring joy to their spiritual brothers and sisters in Iran and properly honour the sacrifices being made by those steadfast servants.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat