

Participant Handouts

Cultivating Distinction: **Bahá'í Electoral Practices**

An Assembly Development Module Workshop

Bahá'í Electoral Practices

OVERVIEW FOR PARTICIPANTS

Purpose

- ★ to increase electors' appreciation of the sanctity of Bahá'í elections

This workshop is targeted to individuals, rather than to Assemblies. Its objective is to increase electors' appreciation of the sanctity of Bahá'í elections. It covers the necessity of elections in Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order; participation in elections as a sacred responsibility; practices that are required or forbidden in Bahá'í elections, and the spiritual principles underlying this guidance; and specific ways in which Bahá'í electoral practices differ from secular elections.

What you will find inside your handouts:

- ★ Quotations and worksheets for the various segments of the workshop
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by you
- ★ An evaluation form to be filled out by the Assembly within two months after the workshop

If you would like to have information on additional workshops or other Assembly development resources, ask your Assembly Development representative or contact the Office of Assembly Development at (847) 733-3490, by mail at 1233 Central Street, Evanston, IL 60201, or by e-mail at OAD@usbnc.org.

Note: If time is short for any exercise, focus on the quotations in bold

The Call to a New State of Mind: The Bahá'í Electoral Process as an Expression of Rectitude of Conduct

“Such a rectitude of conduct must . . . be exemplified in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions.”

“The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize* the forces of a new civilization.”

The Universal House of Justice, *Ridván Message to the Bahá'ís of the World*, 1996.

“How great, therefore, how staggering the responsibility that must weigh upon the present generation of the American believers, at this early stage in their spiritual and administrative evolution, to weed out, by every means in their power, those faults, habits, and tendencies which they have inherited from their own nation, and to cultivate, patiently and prayerfully, those distinctive qualities and characteristics that are so indispensable* to their effective participation in the great redemptive work of their Faith.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 20.

“Upon the extent to which these basic requirements are met, and the manner in which the American believers fulfill them in their individual lives, administrative activities, and social relationships, must depend the measure of the manifold blessings which the All-Bountiful Possessor can vouchsafe* to them all. **These requirements are none other than a high sense of moral rectitude in their social and administrative activities, absolute chastity in their individual lives, and complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or color.”**

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 22.

“This rectitude* of conduct, with its implications of justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness, must distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 23.

“Such a rectitude of conduct must . . . be exemplified* in the conduct of all Bahá'í electors, when exercising their sacred rights and functions.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.

***Canalize:** to channel into a particular direction; provide an outlet for

***Indispensable:** absolutely necessary or essential

***Vouchsafe:** to give or grant; to permit or allow

***Rectitude:** rightness of principle or practice; moral virtue

***Exemplify:** to show by example

The Bahá'í Electoral Process as an Expression of Rectitude of Conduct, continued

“A rectitude of conduct . . . in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation. . . .”

“A rectitude of conduct which, in all its manifestations, offers a striking contrast to the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation and of the parties and factions that compose it. . . .”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 41.

“Their outward conduct is but a reflection of their inward life, and their inward life a mirror of their outward conduct.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 271.

“But occupation with the mechanics of Bahá'í Administration, divorced from the animating spirit of the Cause, leads to a distortion, to an arid secularization foreign to the nature of the Administration. Equally significant to the procedures of election . . . is the evocation of that rarefied atmosphere of prayer and reflection, that quiet dignity of the process, devoid of nominations and campaigning, in which the individual's freedom to choose is limited only by his own conscience, exercised in private in an attitude that invites communion with the Holy Spirit. In this sphere, the elector regards the outcome as an expression of the will of God, and those elected as being primarily responsible to that will, not to the constituency which elected them. An election thus conducted portrays an aspect of that organic unity of the inner and outer realities of human life which is necessary to the construction of a mature society in this new Age. In no other system do individuals exercise such a breadth of freedom in the electoral process.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter of December 29, 1998, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, pp. 10-11.

The Administrative Order: Pattern for Future Society

Focus questions

- ★ Why is it so important that we understand and build Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order? What consequences are involved?
- ★ In what ways is Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order unique?

- ***Dissociate:** to separate
- ***Tantamount:** equivalent, same as
- ***Permeate:** to penetrate, pervade, be diffused throughout
- ***Incarnate:** to take on a concrete form
- ***Imbue:** to inspire; infuse into
- ***Regenerate:** to cause rebirth or complete moral reform
- ***Enunciate:** to proclaim; declare
- ***Propound:** to put forward for consideration or acceptance

“To dissociate* the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount* to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 5.

“Few will fail to recognize that the Spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh upon the world . . . can never permeate* and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates* itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name, wholly identify itself with His principles, and function in conformity with His laws.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19.

“For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued* mankind with a new and regenerating* Spirit. He has not merely enunciated* certain universal principles, or propounded* a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19.

“It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions. Such an attempt would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 152.

“The Bahá'í Commonwealth of the future, of which this vast Administrative Order is the sole framework, is, both in theory and practice, not only unique in the entire history of political

The Administrative Order: Pattern for Future Society, continued

“It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá’í Community is wholly consecrated. . . .”

institutions, but can find no parallel in the annals of any of the world’s recognized religious systems.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 152.

“This new-born Administrative Order incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government [democracy, autocracy, and aristocracy], without being in any sense a mere replica* of any one of them, and without introducing within its machinery any of the objectionable features which they inherently possess. It blends and harmonizes, as no government fashioned by mortal hands has as yet accomplished, the salutary* truths which each of these systems undoubtedly contains without vitiating* the integrity of those God-given verities on which it is ultimately founded.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 152-53.

“The teaching of the Administration should, indeed, be considered as forming a permanent and vital feature of every Bahá’í summer school. For upon its thorough and intelligent understanding by the entire community of the believers must inevitably depend the effectiveness and continued expansion of Bahá’í activities throughout the world.”

Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 6, 1934, *Centres of Bahá’í Learning*, p. 9, #22.

“They [the community of the Most Great Name] alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity* whose fabric they themselves are weaving.

“Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can mature and develop. It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá’í Community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society. For this process is actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.”

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 194-95.

***Replica:** exact copy

***Salutary:** healthy, beneficial

***Vitiate:** to corrupt, spoil, pervert

***Polity:** system of government

Elections in Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order

Focus question

- ★ Why are elections a necessary element of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order?

Elections as an appointment of God

“Let us recall His explicit and often-repeated assurance 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.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 65.

The necessity of elections

“With reference to your next question 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 judgment is defective. For as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has repeatedly emphasized Bahá’í Assemblies are under the guidance and protection of God. 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.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, November 15, 1935, in *The Local Spiritual Assembly*, pp. 9-10.

“The voter elects with the understanding that he is free to choose without any interference whomever his conscience prompts him to select, and he freely accepts the authority of the outcome. In the act of voting, the individual subscribes to a covenant by which the orderliness of society is upheld.”

The Universal House of Justice, December 29, 1988, in *Rights and Responsibilities: The Complementary Roles of the Individual and Institutions*, p. 10.

***Rarefied:** extremely high or elevated, lofty; exalted

Participation in Elections as a Sacred Duty

Focus question

★ How should we view participation in Bahá'í elections?

“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.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 39.

“In order to avoid division and disruption, that the Cause may not fall a prey to conflicting interpretations, and lose thereby its purity and pristine vigor, that its affairs may be conducted with efficiency and promptness, 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.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 41.

“Bahá'í community life . . . 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.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 4, 1935, *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 10, #34.

“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 himself according to his own conscience and discretion.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 198.

“. . . it is desirable that every eligible voter take part, and your Assembly should encourage all the believers to do so. . . .”

Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 10, 1980, *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 13, #34.

“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.”

The Universal House of Justice, June 18, 1980, *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 2, #6.

***Aloof**: apart, at a distance, uninvolved
***Conscientious**: done according to conscience; careful, painstakingly thorough
***Diligent**: done with persevering attention; tireless

Distinguishing Between Bahá'í and Secular Electoral Practices

Focus question

- ★ What are the consequences of Bahá'ís following the electoral practices of politicians?

*Variance:

completely different

***Ensue:** to follow as a result

***Abound:** to occur in great amounts

***Pernicious:** ruinous, wicked, deadly

*Intrigues:

underhanded or deceitful strategies; plots

*Propaganda:

information or ideas methodically spread to promote or injure a cause

*Abhorrent:

loathsome, abominable, detestable

***Altruism:** unselfish concern for the welfare of others

***Electioneer:** to work for the success of a candidate in an election

***Eradicate:** to erase or remove; to pull up by the roots; to destroy utterly

“... 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.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, December 6, 1971, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 8, #23.

“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. The friends should, through their devotion, love, loyalty and altruism*, abolish these evil practices, not imitate them. It is only after the friends completely ignore and sanctify themselves from these evils, that the spirit of God can penetrate and operate in the body of humanity, and in the Bahá'í Community.”

Shoghi Effendi, January 30, 1923, to the friends in Persia, in *The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 1; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), pages 10-11, #37.

“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.”

Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, December 6, 1971, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 8, #23.

Bahá'í Electoral Practices: The Required and the Forbidden

Focus questions

- ★ What is the distinguishing feature of Bahá'í electoral methods?
- ★ What dangers does the practice of nomination pose?

***Electioneer:** to work for the success of a candidate in an election

***Propaganda:** information or ideas methodically spread to promote or injure a cause

***Intrigues:** underhanded or deceitful strategies

***Collusion:** secret agreement for fraudulent or treacherous purposes; conspiracy

***Ensnue:** to follow as a result

***Abound:** to occur in great amounts

***Canvass:** to ask for votes

***Perfidious:** treacherous, deceitful; deliberately unfaithful or disloyal

***Nominate:** to propose someone as a proper person for election to an office

“Electioneering* and all forms of propaganda* are against the spirit of Bahá'í elections.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day*, p. 201.

“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.”

Shoghi Effendi, March 8, 1932, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 7.

“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; otherwise the outcome will be chaos and confusion, serious difficulties will ensue*, mischief will abound* and the confirmation of God will be cut off.”

Shoghi Effendi, January 16, 1932, to the friends in Persia, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), page 12, #44.

“Bahá'í elections of the Community are . . . sanctified from all traces of canvassing* and plotting that characterize the activities of the perfidious*.”

Shoghi Effendi, letter dated April 9, 1932, to the friends in Persia, in *The Spiritual Character of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 3; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), page 10, #35.

“. . . 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 . . . deny that God-given right of every elector to vote only in favor of those who he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates.”

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 136.

“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

Bahá'í Electoral Practices: The Required and the Forbidden, continued

“... the practice of nomination has the great disadvantage of killing in the believer the spirit of initiative, and of self-development.”

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.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 4, 1935, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 9, #31.

“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.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 4, 1935, in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 9, #32.

“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.”

The Universal House of Justice, November 16, 1988, to the International Teaching Center, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, pp. 10-11, #29.

***Incumbent:**
imposed as a duty;
obligatory

***Ostentatious:**
behaving in a way
intended to attract
notice and attention

“As to your last question whether the individual voter can conscientiously vote for himself. The Guardian believes that not only the Bahá'í voter has the right, but is under the moral obligation to do so, in case he finds himself worthy and capable of assuming the responsibilities and duties imposed upon the members of every duly elected Bahá'í assembly. It is for every believer to carefully weigh his own merits and powers, and after a thorough

Bahá'í Electoral Practices: The Required and the Forbidden, continued

“ . . . when an equal number of ballots have been cast . . . priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority. . . . ”

examination of his self decide whether he is fit for such a position or not. There is nothing more harmful to the individual – and also to society – than false humility which is hypocritical, and hence unworthy of a true Bahá'í.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 4, 1935, in *Light of Divine Guidance*, Vol. 1, p. 69.

“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.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 27, 1938, *Dawn of a New Day*, pp. 200-201; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), p. 12, #43.

“Concerning the question you have asked as to whether in elections for Spiritual Assemblies the electors should cast exactly nine votes, or may cast less than this number. Inasmuch as Spiritual Assembly membership, according to the principles of Bahá'í Administration, has been limited for the present to nine members, it follows that no electoral vote can be effective unless it is cast for exactly that number. It is, therefore, the sacred duty of every Bahá'í elector to cast nine votes, neither more nor less, except under special circumstances so as to insure that the results of the elections for the Spiritual Assembly will be effective and on as wide a basis of representation as possible.”

Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, March 27, 1940, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 138; also in *Lights of Guidance* (5th ed.), page 12, #42.

“So great and vital is this principle [the obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard minorities] 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.”

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 35.

Reflecting on a New State of Mind as Electors

Questions for reflection

Answer the following questions, giving examples to illustrate your point:

- ★ In what ways might our current electoral practices seem to fall short of displaying in full measure “a new state of mind” on the part of those who elect Bahá'í institutions?

- ★ What improvements and refinements can we make as a community?

- ★ In what ways can individuals contribute to maintaining and preserving the purity and spiritual character of Bahá'í elections?

Personal Action Plan

**Reflect and
record your
plans**

In order to demonstrate my “new state of mind” as an elector, my contributions to the process of enhancing the purity and spiritual character of Bahá’í elections will be . . .