

Bahá'í Elections

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

The method for selecting members to serve administrative positions in the Bahá'í Faith is uniquely spiritual in nature. It does not resemble any government, civil, social or clerical order known in history. The Faith does not have authorized professional clergy to manage and control its affairs, and there are no monasteries, seminaries or religious orders where one can earn entitlement to a leadership position. The fundamental spiritual principle summarizing the unique Bahá'í attitude towards seeking any kind of leadership in the Faith is clearly conveyed in a statement by the Universal House of Justice: "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."¹

All Bahá'í electoral processes are, therefore, sanctified from nominations, campaigning, electioneering or canvassing for votes. The elections are democratic in nature, and carried out in a spiritual atmosphere of prayer and reflection on those best qualified to hold the positions of service. Elections are by secret ballot and those with the most votes are elected to serve the positions. All Bahá'ís residing in a given locality, 21 years of age or older, are eligible to be elected and may vote, except those individuals who have received sanctions from Bahá'í National Assemblies that include the loss of voting or administrative rights.

Bahá'ís take part yearly in the sacred act of electing members to Local Spiritual Assemblies and in electing delegates to National Conventions. National Spiritual Assembly and Regional Bahá'í Council elections are held on a yearly basis as well, and every five years an election is held for members of the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'í elections might also take place on other occasions for various purposes.



Continental Bahá'í House of Worship for Africa, near Kampala, Uganda

OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the sanctity of Bahá'í elections, their unique process, and the privilege of participation.

¹ SNBE, p. 6, #18

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, one at a time as described below.

- 1. READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
Have two participants take turns reading the quotation out loud so that it is read twice.
- 2. CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*
 - A. If anyone would like to have better understanding of a word used in the quotation, now is the time to refer to its substitute phrase, definition or synonym, which can be found in the boxes below each quotation. Read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud so everyone can hear.
 - B. Read the sentence again that contains the word you selected, while **substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition or synonym from the box below the quotation.
 - C. If anyone would like a better understanding of another word, repeat the process above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words in the quotation.
- 3. FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
Take turns stating each basic fact or truth you can find in the quotation about Bahá'í elections.

QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...*

1. 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.

(Shoghi Effendi, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, Prepared by the Universal House of Justice, 1963-1990, Vol. I, p. 315, #706)

aid: help and assistance
amity: friendly relations
bounty: generous giving
detached: disconnected in heart
elections: voting to choose persons to fill official positions
guidance: instruction and direction
hearts: nature, which becomes attracted, loves, ↗

and grows attached
participate: take part in common with others
supplicating: asking for earnestly and humbly
unity: a spiritual condition of harmony, agreement, peace and accord, free of conflict, dissension, contention and strife
whole-heartedly: with complete and sincere dedication

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2. 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, *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams to the Bahá'ís of North America, 1932-1946*, pp. 3-4)

adult: persons 21 years of age or older
allow: permit
cast: formally record
circumstances: accompanying events and conditions
conscience: sense of moral rightness or fairness
deprived: hindered or withheld from
discretion: individual choice or judgment
distinguishing: set apart from others by prominent qualities [type of]
exercise: carry out or perform
imply: express indirectly
intelligently: with skill, good judgment, and wisdom
justify: show sufficient reason

necessity: morally required principle
obligation: moral duty
reaffirm: positively express again
recognized: formally accepted and acknowledged [as a]
responsibility: act for which one is morally accountable
right: privilege to which one is entitled by authority
sacred: holy and spiritually important
understanding: clear comprehension
vital: high or essential
voting: expression by ballot one's choice(s) for Bahá'í administrative service

3. ...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.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932*, p. 88)

ability: skill or competence to perform the task
combine: bring into harmonious union for a common end or purpose
consider: think about carefully
consideration: attention or thought as grounds for choosing
delegates: voting representatives
devotion: acts of ardent dedication and affection
experience: previous participation or learning in the activity
incumbent: imposed as a duty
irrespective: having no regard
least: smallest possible
loyalty: allegiance and faithfulness [to the Cause, its ideals, and institutions]
material: physical or worldly
mature: fully developed [from]

mind: mental and intellectual capabilities
necessary: essential or needed
passion: acting on ungovernable emotions as distinguished from reason
prejudice: ignorant and preconceived judgment of different others, marked by a sense of self-superiority, suspicion, intolerance, or irrational hatred
qualities: distinctive virtues, powers, or traits of character
recognized: formally accepted and acknowledged
selfless: having no regard for one's self [in]
trace: minute sign or evidence
unquestioned: undoubted, unopposed, or undisputed [in]
well-trained: excellently and properly directed and educated in development [of]

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

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932*, p. 136)

elector: one entitled to vote
inspired: divinely influenced and motivated
prayer: "Prayer is essentially communion between man and God..." (Shoghi Effendi, *DG*, p. 78)

reflection: attentive consideration or contemplation
uphold: give support to

5. 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.

(The Universal House of Justice, cited in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 6, #18)

abilities: natural or acquired physical, moral, or intellectual powers, skills, or competencies
active: engaged or involved by action or works
character: distinguishing traits, qualities, or nature
consciousness: inward awareness or awakened knowledge
duty: moral obligation
electorate: body of people entitled to vote
expected: considered bound by duty
familiarize: make well known to or accustom
Guardian: One appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in ☞

His Will and Testament to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi.
outlined: indicated as the principle features
requirements: needed essentials
responsibility: act for which one is morally accountable
satisfy: adequately fulfill
training: the learning of skills and proficiencies through instruction and guidance

6. The beloved Guardian has pointed out to us that should we follow the method of the politicians [examples Shoghi Effendi has used include intrigues, party politics, propaganda, deception, collusion, compulsion, canvassing, nominations and electioneering] 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.

(Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, cited in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, p. 8, #23)

abound: prevail and be widespread
arise: come about
canvassing: to solicit or seek votes or political support
care: watchful attention, interest, and concern
chaos: utter confusion and disorder
character: distinguishing traits, qualities, or nature
collusion: the secret agreement or cooperation for a deceitful purpose
compulsion: using anything that forces or compels someone in order to persuade to some action
confirmations: validations and assurances that cause spiritual strength
confusion: a condition of being disturbed, confounded, and a failure to discern
deception: to cause to believe what is false, or disbelieve what is true
differences: disagreement in opinions; disputes
electioneering: to work for the election of a person
ensue: take place as a result
exercised: carried out or performed
grave: significantly serious
Guardian: One appointed by `Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament to carry on into the future the function of authoritative interpretation of the Sacred Writings and the care and protection of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi.

intrigues: secretly contrived plots or schemes to trick or cheat for some purpose
maintained: upheld and defended against opposition or danger
method: technique or way of doing things
mischief: troublesome or harmful conditions
misunderstandings: quarrels and dissension
nominations: proposing someone by name as a candidate for an elected position
party politics: attempts to control the appointments, decisions, or elections of those who manage the affairs of government, by groups of persons organized for the purpose of promoting shared theories and principles
politicians: persons engaged in party politics as a profession
preserved: saved intact
propaganda: the deliberate spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of promoting or damaging a person, a cause, or an institution
purity: freedom from any sinister or improper motives or views
utmost: greatest or highest degree of
warnings: notices in advance of consequential dangers or evils

7. Let us recall His [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] 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.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932*, p. 65)

appointed: officially decreed, selected, or named
Assembly: Bahá’í Administrative Body
assurances: pledges or guarantees of certainty
atmosphere: surrounding or pervading influence or condition
cheerfulness: a bright, content, and unchanged temper or disposition, shown in face, voice, and action
decision: report of the conclusion
detachment: indifference to worldly concerns or partisan opinions; impartiality

explicit: so clearly expressed there is no question as to meaning or intent
inspired: divinely influenced and motivated
rarefied: more spiritual or refined
recall: be reminded of
selflessness: devotion to the welfare and concerns of others and not one’s own
submit: fully surrender or yield
unreservedly: without limits or holding back
verdict: finding or decision

SHARING: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, the one thing that was most outstanding or inspiring and how it made him or her feel. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

The one thing from the quotations that was the most outstanding or inspiring to me was _____

 It made me feel _____
 Explain _____

SOME QUESTIONS: *A gentle breeze from the testing winds...*

Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

- The Universal House of Justice wrote: “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.”¹ Therefore, there is no _____ in Bahá’í elections.
 - a. campaigning
 - b. nominating
 - c. canvassing
 - d. public praising of individuals by name or inference
 - e. platforming: (public address of principles on which a group of persons stand, and on which they appeal for support)
 - f. fun
 - g. private balloting

¹ SNBE, p. 6, #18

2. On election day

- a. one is not obligated to cast his vote, if he feels the circumstances under which he lives do not justify or allow him to exercise that right intelligently and with understanding.
- b. no adult believer [with voting rights] should be deprived of participating in the election.
- c. the friends must whole-heartedly participate in the elections.
- d. the elector is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold.
- e. the voter should talk to friends about whom they are voting for and vote for the same people.
- f. all should submit to the final decision of the voters, unreservedly and with cheerfulness.
- g. Bahá'ís should seek God's guidance and supplicate His aid and bounty.
- h. if an individual has received sanctions from a Bahá'í institution, which includes the loss of administrative rights, that individual is not eligible to vote in Bahá'í elections.

3. Shoghi Effendi wrote: "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 Other than these characteristics, list five additional qualities the Guardian has identified as desirable when considering qualifications for membership to Bahá'í institutions.

4. When Bahá'ís vote they are to make their considerations "without the least trace of passion or prejudice." What does "without the least trace of passion" mean to you? _____

5. When Bahá'ís vote they are to make their considerations "irrespective of any material consideration." List some "material considerations" you can think of. _____

6. Even though each Bahá'í is free to choose whether to participate in Bahá'í elections, the Universal House of Justice has written: "...it is desirable that every eligible voter take part."² Shoghi Effendi stated: "...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..."³ Why, do you think, is it desirable that every eligible voter takes part in the election? _____

7. Comment on some ways one could contribute to maintaining and preserving the "purity and spiritual character of Bahá'í elections." _____

8. When election results are announced the Bahá'ís are to accept the results

- a. as appointed of God.
- b. as truly inspired.
- c. as inaccurate if you were inspired to vote differently.
- d. unreservedly and with cheerfulness.

¹ COC, Vol. I, p. 317, #716

² SNBE, p. 13, #34

³ BA, p. 39

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

Facilitator

Read through the following paragraph together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action. When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: *“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....”* Imagine how the Bahá'í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: **“One could....”**

From your experience in this study class on Bahá'í elections, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** _____

To the Bahá'ís of the World, from the Universal House of Justice...

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.

The world Order of Bahá'u'lláh is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Báb in the Persian Bayan, its foundational features prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Throughout the entire planet the devoted followers of Bahá'u'lláh are laboring to develop further the Bahá'í Administrative Order described by the Guardian “not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order”, thus setting the foundation for a world civilization destined to yield its dazzling splendor in the centuries to come. They do so notwithstanding the conditions of turmoil and disorder alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh in affirming that *“the world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”*

With concerted worldwide endeavour to advance the process of entry by troops gathering momentum through implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan, it is now opportune that the believers everywhere give greater attention to strengthening the process by which Assemblies, national and local, are elected. The manner of participation by all adult members of the community in these elections is a distinguishing feature of the System of Bahá'u'lláh; for it is a bounden duty that confers a high privilege upon every Bahá'í to select, as a responsible citizen of the new world being brought into existence, the composition of the institutions having authority over the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In this regard, indifference and neglect on the part of any believer are alien to

the spirit of the Cause. The friends must strive ceaselessly to avoid being contaminated with these destructive attitudes, which have inflicted such damage on the integrity and authority of the institutions of a declining world order.

In describing Bahá'í elections, Shoghi Effendi, through a letter written on his behalf, conveyed that “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.”

The manner in which the elector exercises the right and privilege to cast his vote is therefore of great significance. Shoghi Effendi's instruction in this passage further explains that “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 local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and wholeheartedly 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 interest 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.”

While there should be no mention of personalities in connection with Bahá'í elections, it is quite appropriate for believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected. Shoghi Effendi offers clear guidance on this point: “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.” Among the “necessary qualities” specified by the Guardian are those “of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience”. With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, “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.”

Through their wholehearted embrace of the Bahá'í electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

(The Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, 25 March 2007)

ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. a, b, c, d, and e
2. a, b, c, d, f, g, and h
3. unquestioned loyalty, selfless devotion, a well-trained mind, recognized ability, and mature experience
4. anything similar to: without the smallest possible minute sign or evidence of acting on ungovernable emotions as distinguished from reason
5. physical condition, financial condition, travel conditions, social standings, and all other similar answers are valuable
6. all answers are valuable
7. all answers are valuable
8. a, b, and d