

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

18 July 2000

[To an individual]

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice received your letter of 31 May 2000 and has asked us to send you the following reply.

To your question “What do I have to think of the promotion of a Bahá'í democratization?” there is both a simple reply and a more complex one, and the House of Justice feels that it is desirable to approach the matter from both points of view.

Firstly, as a Bahá'í who has given many decades of outstanding service in your community, you understand that the Bahá'í Administrative Order is an integral part of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh; it is a divinely conceived system which, as the Guardian explained in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, “incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government, 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.”

It is the continuing task of Bahá'ís to increase their understanding of the principles on which the Administrative Order is founded, and to improve the faithfulness with which they implement these principles in their actions. Indeed one of the specific needs of this period in the development of the Faith is the evolution of national and local Bahá'í institutions. If, therefore, by “the promotion of a Bahá'í democratization” is meant the furthering of an increasingly responsible participation in the work of the community by its individual members, this is highly meritorious, and should be a continual endeavor of Bahá'í institutions.

That is the simple answer. However, if the intention is that the Bahá'í Administrative Order should be altered to more closely accord with current concepts of political democracy, a more complex series of issues arises. In *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Shoghi Effendi lists evidences “of the non-autocratic character of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and of its inclination to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs,” but this does not justify a proposal to change the system which has been established in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and in the elucidations of Shoghi Effendi. Such an effort, whether or not described as “the promotion of a Bahá'í democratization,” would be contrary to the clear teachings of the Faith. Consideration of the various specific questions included in your letter will help to clarify this distinction.

In the second paragraph of your letter you say that you understand that the Bahá'í World Order is “at least 80%, a theocratic-aristocratic order.” Inasmuch as the Order of Bahá'u'lláh is an integral part of the divine Revelation that He, as a Manifestation of God, has given us, one could say that this Order is essentially theocratic, but inasmuch as it is entirely devoid of any kind of clergy or priesthood, it is not at all a “theocracy” in the sense in which the term is generally used and understood.

Similarly, the quality of aristocracy (rule by the best) as it appears in the Faith is in sharp contrast to what is generally understood by this term. Free from electioneering or such external

pressures as those coming from economic power or manipulation of the press, the believers seek to elect for membership on their governing institutions those persons whom they regard as best qualified for such office. The elected members are then responsible to God and to their consciences, rather than to those who elect them. You are undoubtedly familiar with Shoghi Effendi's words in *Bahá'í Administration* on the attitude and responsibility of members of Assemblies:

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.

As already noted above, the way in which believers become members of the elected institutions is democratic. It is, indeed, far more democratic than the methods by which the members of most parliaments are elected. The Bahá'í electoral system is entirely free from the power and bargaining of parties and factions, and from the manipulations of vested interests. Each voter is free to cast his or her ballot for whomever he or she chooses.

Even in the best democracies nowadays the driving incentive in elections is the wish of each politician to obtain power so as to be able to carry out the program that he particularly favors—an election becomes a competition which the self-promoting candidates either “win” or “lose.” The electorate is treated as a mass to be swayed, by rhetoric and various forms of inducement, to support one or other candidate. In the Bahá'í system, however, the voters are the active force and the motive which impels them is to choose those individuals who are best suited to serve on the institution. The persons elected are passive in the electoral process (except in their role as voters) and accept election as an obligation to serve the community in response to the wish of the electorate. In other words, the systems differ in their essential spirit: one is a seeking for power, the other is an acceptance of responsibility for service.

You mention several things which you describe as the most significant democratic principles and values. Among them are transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue. Here too, just as the spirit underlying the Bahá'í system differs from that impelling most current democratic systems, so do the methods of implementing these principles and the attitude of those involved.

In general one can say that modern democracies have been established as the outcome of attempts to limit the power of absolute monarchy, of dictatorships, or of certain dominant classes.

This may have come about gradually through the centuries, or tumultuously by a series of revolutions. Thus, even when democratic constitutions and structures have been established, there remains a suspicion of authority as such, and a tension between the degree of freedom accorded to individual citizens and the imposition of sufficient public discipline to protect the weak against the selfish pursuits of the strong among the citizenry. The operation of transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue is thus imbued with a spirit of partisanship that easily descends into the merciless invasion of personal privacy, the dissemination of calumny, the exaggeration of mistrust, and the misuse of the news media at the hands of vested interests. The reaction of those who attempt to protect themselves against such distortions of the system produces secretiveness, concealment of uncomfortable facts, and reciprocal misuse of the media—in all, a perpetuation of disharmony in the social fabric.

In contrast to these patterns bred by traditional antagonisms, the Bahá'í system is based upon the ideals of unity, harmony, justice, diversity and forbearance in the building of a divinely conceived administrative structure through a process of mutual learning and discovery. As already noted, the element of power-seeking is entirely absent. All members of a Bahá'í community, no matter what position they may temporarily occupy in the administrative structure, are expected to regard themselves as involved in a learning process, as they strive to understand and implement the laws and principles of the Faith. As part of this process, the Assemblies are encouraged to continually share their hopes and cares and the news of developments with the members of the community and to seek their views and support. There are, of course, matters such as the personal problems of a believer which he (or she) brings to his Assembly for advice, the amounts of the contributions of individual believers to the Fund, and so forth, in relation to which the Assembly must observe strict confidentiality. As in any just system of government the proper balance has to be sought and found between extremes. In this connection, you will recall Shoghi Effendi's statement in Bahá'í Administration:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.

Wherever one finds malfunctioning in a Bahá'í community, it can be traced to a failure to follow properly the laws, principles and methods laid down in the Writings. The overcoming of such shortcomings is part of the learning process in which all Bahá'ís are involved. The continual aim of the institutions of the Bahá'í community—whether it be through the operation of summer schools and training institutes, through the development of the Nineteen Day Feasts and National Conventions, or through day-to-day interaction among the friends—is to empower the individual believers so that they will learn how to live their lives with increasing knowledge, wisdom, unity and fruitfulness in conformity with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Further, in addition to the Spiritual Assemblies, the Bahá'í Administrative Order also contains the institutions of the Continental Boards of Counselors and their Auxiliary Boards. Their endeavors, with the individuals, the community and the institutions, are intended to help maintain the true spirit of the Faith, to counsel the governing institutions and to assist them to attain the high ideals set before them by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. As the House of Justice wrote in a letter dated 24 April 1972: "The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past." The House of Justice went on to comment that, only as the Bahá'í community grows, and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from

past ages, will the vital interdependence of these two arms of the administration be properly understood and the value of their interaction be fully recognized.

Two other issues raised by you also deserve attention. Direct election of the main institutions of a society can hardly be regarded as a significant democratic principle. In the United States of America, for example, the president is elected by an electoral college of individuals chosen in state elections. In some other countries the president is elected by the parliament, not by the people. However, whether direct election is a democratic principle or not, it cannot be applied in the Bahá'í Faith because it is stated in the Sacred Writings that the Universal House of Justice must be elected in a three-stage election and National Spiritual Assemblies must be the outcome of a two-stage election.

Finally, there is the question of the membership of the Universal House of Justice being restricted to men. This, likewise, is a provision of the Sacred Writings, as stated clearly by both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. It should be viewed in the light of the principle mentioned above, that election to institutions of Bahá'í administration is regarded as a summons to service and not as an accession to power. It is also significant that the Universal House of Justice has itself written that the fact that its membership is restricted to men cannot be used as an indication that men excel women or that the Bahá'í principle of the equality of the sexes is not valid. As you know, it is a mandate of the Universal House of Justice to ensure the establishment of the equality of men and women, and you are undoubtedly aware of the vigor with which the Bahá'ís are putting this into effect. This matter was discussed at some length in a letter written on 31 May 1988 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, a copy of which is enclosed for your information.

The House of Justice hopes that these comments will help you to resolve the confusion which you indicate is troubling you.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat