

SECTION 12

We turn now to the next subject of our study: the nature of Bahá'í elections. Given the importance of the subject, our discussion will enter into considerable detail, drawing on passages written both by the Guardian, or on his behalf, and by the Universal House of Justice. You are encouraged to take the time necessary to go through the quotations carefully and reflect on the features of the electoral process that distinguish Bahá'í administration so sharply from political processes in the world today. Remember that we are interested not in the mechanics of Bahá'í elections but in the principles underlying their operation that Shoghi Effendi expounded as he strove to bring the Administrative Order into being.

Participating in the Bahá'í electoral process is, of course, a duty enjoined on every believer. We each discharge this duty by taking part annually in the election of the Local Spiritual Assembly that serves our community and in the unit convention held in the area where we reside. A small number of believers in every country are also elected as delegates to vote each year for the National Spiritual Assembly at the National Convention. Further, in countries where applicable, the members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies in a region vote for those who will serve on the Regional Bahá'í Council. Let us begin our study of the electoral process by reading the following passage, which describes the attitude that Shoghi Effendi urges the believers to adopt towards the voting process:

“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.”⁴²

Regarding the qualifications for membership on an Assembly, the Guardian encourages the friends to bear the following in mind:

“... 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.”⁴³

He gives the following further instructions in this respect:

“Due regard must be paid to their actual capacity and present attainments, and only those who are best qualified for membership, be they men or women, and irrespective of social standing, should be elected to the extremely responsible position of a member of the Bahá'í Assembly.”⁴⁴

In the passage below, Shoghi Effendi emphasizes the responsibility placed on the individual believer to make the wisest possible choice at the time of election:

“... I do not feel it to be in keeping with the spirit of the Cause to impose any limitation upon the freedom of the believers to choose those of any race, nationality or temperament who best combine the essential qualifications for membership of administrative institutions. They should disregard personalities and concentrate their attention on the qualities and requirements of office, without prejudice, passion or partiality. The Assembly should be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.”⁴⁵

The Universal House of Justice elaborates on this theme in the following passage:

“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.⁴⁶

The House of Justice offers the following further guidance in this respect:

“It is expected that in the future ... there will be very large numbers of individuals who have the qualities which make them fit for service on Spiritual Assemblies. Of these only a few can be elected at any one time. 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.⁴⁷

While some discussion among the believers of the qualifications and requirements for membership is acceptable, Shoghi Effendi warns against their making reference to personalities, that is, to specific individuals:

“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. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others... .”⁴⁸

In order for the individual believer to make a wise choice at the time of election, it is necessary, Shoghi Effendi explains, for him or her to become fully involved in Bahá'í community life:

“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.”⁴⁹

In this light, the practice of nominating candidates for service, we are advised by the Guardian, is alien to the spirit of Bahá'í elections:

“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. And since the practice of nomination hinders the development of such qualities in the believer, and in addition leads to corruption and partisanship, it has to be entirely discarded in all Bahá'í elections.”⁵⁰

The Universal House of Justice explains further:

“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.^{»51}

The following passage, written by the House of Justice, highlights a principle central both to the electoral process and to service on administrative institutions:

“Election to an Assembly, from a Bahá’í point of view, is not a right that people are entitled to, or an honor to which they should aspire; it is a duty and responsibility to which they may be called. The purpose is that those who are elected to an Assembly should be the most worthy for this service; this does not and cannot mean that all those who are worthy will be elected.”^{»52}

The exercises below will help you think through the ideas presented in the above passages. We hope that you will not be content simply to complete each one but will discuss them fully with the members of your study group. In many cases you will find the answers obvious. But remember that the purpose of the exercises is not to test your understanding of the Bahá’í electoral process but to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on its nature and the principles involved.

1. Answer the following questions:
 - a. Is it appropriate for the believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected? _____
 - b. If the believers discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it acceptable for them to mention specific names of individuals that they feel are suitable for service?

 - c. If the believers discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it all right for them to allude to individuals that they feel would be suitable for service, without mentioning any names specifically? _____
 - d. If the believers discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership, is it all right for them to mention specific people as examples of the qualities under discussion? _____
 - e. Is it all right to discuss the performance of the current members of an Assembly?

 - f. In the exchange of views before an election, is it all right for the believers to discuss deficiencies noted in the functioning of an Assembly? _____
 - g. Is it all right to consider oneself suitable for service on an Assembly? _____
 - h. If one feels one is suited for service on an Assembly, is it all right to bring to the attention of others one’s qualifications and experience, without actually asking them to vote for oneself?

 - i. If one has personal or professional commitments that would make it difficult to serve on an Assembly, is it acceptable to bring this to the attention of others before an election? _____
 - j. If one knows something about a believer that would affect his or her suitability for service on an Assembly, does one have the responsibility to make this known to other voters?

k. Is it all right for the believers to discuss for whom they voted after the election?

l. If one does not feel there are any individuals in the community that one knows well enough, should one not participate in the election? _____

m. If one does not feel that one is familiar enough with other members of the community, should one try to figure out for whom others are voting and follow their example? _____

n. If one does not feel familiar enough with the other members of the community, should one rely upon prayer at the time of the election and do one's best to choose from among the names that come to mind?

2. Below are several factors that might come to one's mind when considering the qualifications of those most suited for service on an Assembly. For each, indicate whether you regard it as "important", "not very important", "irrelevant", or "unfavorable". Mark them with an "I", "NVI", "IR" and "UN" accordingly.

_____ That he or she possesses a reasonable degree of understanding of the teachings of the Faith

_____ That he or she possesses a good understanding of the messages of the Universal House of Justice regarding the global Plan under way in the Bahá'í world

_____ That he or she has a demonstrated ability to translate the teachings into action

_____ That he or she has a demonstrated ability to help others translate the teachings into action

_____ That his or her life reflects a degree of coherence between belief and action

_____ That he or she contributes, through both word and deed, to an environment conducive to the participation of growing numbers in collective action

_____ That he or she has a demonstrated ability to consult well with others

_____ That he or she is forceful in consultation

_____ That he or she constantly puts forward suggestions about projects the community should undertake

_____ That he or she is prone to conflict

_____ That he or she is able to acknowledge when he or she has made a mistake

_____ That he or she has the ability to build unity in the community

_____ That he or she has longstanding experience in the teaching field

_____ That he or she has served in an administrative capacity before

_____ That he or she has been a Bahá'í for many years

- _____ That he or she shares the same concerns about the Bahá'í community that you have
- _____ That he or she often expresses criticism about the way the Bahá'í community is administered
- _____ That he or she is familiar with the progress of the Bahá'í community worldwide
- _____ That he or she is well travelled
- _____ That he or she has been exposed to other cultures
- _____ That he or she is entertaining when addressing an audience
- _____ That he or she is poised when addressing an audience
- _____ That he or she is charismatic
- _____ That he or she holds a high ranking position in society
- _____ That he or she is highly educated
- _____ That he or she is well dressed
- _____ That he or she is wealthy

Clearly there are many other factors that may come to a person's mind when considering the qualifications of those suited for service on an Assembly. You may wish to think of a few more and discuss them with your group.