

# BAHÁ'Í ELECTIONS

## Quotes and Guidance



National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the Czech Republic, 2022

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1. 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.

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, February 4, 1935; *Lights of Guidance* No. 32)

2. The strength and progress of the Bahá'í community depend upon the election of pure, faithful and active souls.... Canvassing is abhorred....

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly, 9 April 1932; translated from the Persian)

3. 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.

(From a letter of the Guardian to the friends in Persia, February 27, 1923; *Lights of Guidance* No. 38)

4. 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 for himself according to his own conscience and discretion....

(In the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi, appended to a letter dated 28 April 1935 written on his behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada; *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America 1932-1946*, pp. 3-4)

5. 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.

(From a memorandum dated 18 June 1980 to the International Teaching Centre)

6. These Local Spiritual Assemblies will have to be elected directly by the friends, and every declared believer of 21 years and above<sup>1</sup>, 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.

(From a letter to the Bahá'ís of the West, Japan and Australasia, 12 March 1923; *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 39)

7. There is no minimum of ballots required for an election to be considered valid, either in the case of a Local Spiritual Assembly or of delegates to the National Convention. Nevertheless, it is desirable that every eligible voter take part, and your Assembly should encourage all believers to do so....

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 10 July 1980)

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<sup>1</sup> As of Ridván 2021, the age for voters for Local Spiritual Assemblies was lowered to 18; see quotes Nos 15 and 16.

8. 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 of his fellow-believers, to keep in touch with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly 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 interests 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. 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.

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 4 February 1935; *Lights of Guidance* No. 34)

9. 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, but should stress the necessity of getting fully acquainted with the qualifications of membership referred to in our Beloved's Tablets and of learning more about one another through direct, personal experience rather than through the reports and opinions of our friends.

(From a letter of Shoghi Effendi to the Spiritual Assembly of Akron, Ohio, 14 May 1927; *Lights of Guidance* No. 36)

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

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 27 May 1927; *Lights of Guidance* No. 39)

11. The friends must ... turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections.

(From a letter of the Guardian to the friends in Persia, 16 January 1932; *Lights of Guidance* No. 44)

12. Again I earnestly appeal to every one of you, and renew my only request with all the ardor of my conviction, to make, before and during the coming Convention, yet another effort, this time more spontaneous and selfless than before, and endeavor to approach your task—the election of your delegates, as well as your national and local representatives—with that purity of spirit that can alone obtain our Beloved's most cherished desire. Let us recall His 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.

Let us first strive to fulfil these conditions, difficult yet essential, in our lives, so that, contented and assured, we may make of this new year of activity a year of abundant blessings, of unprecedented achievements.

May this dearest wish be fulfilled!

(Shoghi Effendi, 23 February 1924)

13. ... 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.

(From a letter written by Shoghi Effendi, 3 June 1925; *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 88)

14. 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.

(From a letter written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma, 27 December 1923)

15. ... we have decided that, immediately following this Ridván, while the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly shall remain twenty-one, the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections shall be lowered to eighteen. We have no doubt that Bahá'í youth everywhere who are of age will vindicate our confidence in their ability to fulfil "conscientiously and diligently" the "sacred duty" to which every Bahá'í elector is called.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2021 message)

16. As stated in the Ridván 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice, immediately following this Ridván the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections is to be lowered to eighteen. The House of Justice has directed us to write to you with some further information relating to this change.

As you are already aware, the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly is to remain twenty-one; this shall also remain the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Regional Bahá'í Council. While a Bahá'í who has turned eighteen becomes eligible to vote at a unit convention, the age at which a believer becomes eligible for election as a delegate to National Convention shall remain twenty-one as well.

(Universal House of Justice, Department of the Secretariat, 21 April 2021)

17. Beware, beware lest the foul odour of the parties and peoples ... 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.

(From the writings of Shoghi Effendi or letters written on his)

18. The electors ... must prayerfully and devotedly and after meditation and reflection elect faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent souls who are worthy of membership.

(From the writings of Shoghi Effendi or letters written on his behalf)

19. ... the utmost caution and care should be exercised lest anything should hamper the delegates in the full and free exercise of their functions. In discharging this sacred function no influence whatever, no pressure from any quarter ... should under any circumstances affect their views or restrict their freedom.

(From the writings of Shoghi Effendi or letters written on his behalf)

# THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

25 March 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

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 labouring 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 splendour 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 new World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”

With the 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 whole-heartedly 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 interests 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.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

# THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

## DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

4 August 2016

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

One of the distinguishing features of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is the Bahá'í Administrative Order, the nucleus and pattern of the future World Order He has promised. A fundamental aspect of the endeavours of the friends to upraise that Order is the election by believers in locations across the globe of their delegates to the National Convention, occasions which also allow for discussions regarding local and national affairs. These delegates, in turn, will “fulfil the functions of an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly.” In addition, it is they, as Shoghi Effendi explained, who have the great privilege and delicate task “to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause”. It behooves each National Assembly, then, to do everything possible to assist the friends to become conscious of their vital obligation and to facilitate the participation of the greatest number in the election of the delegates.

As stated in the by-laws of a National Spiritual Assembly, delegates are chosen under the principle of proportionate representation. In a letter dated 21 July 1985 to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice indicated that delegates to National Conventions everywhere would be elected on the basis of electoral units. To this end, a National Assembly would divide the territory under its jurisdiction into electoral units, based on the number of adult Bahá'ís in each area, in such a way that each unit would be responsible for electing preferably one delegate only. However, in some instances, a unit could be made large enough to be the electoral base for several delegates. Although a convention is usually called in each unit, the House of Justice indicated that if holding a unit convention was not effective or viable, National Assemblies were free to explore other methods of facilitating the process of voting, such as dividing electoral units into sub-units or establishing polling stations where the friends could leave their ballots on the voting day.

Since 2001, the division of countries into clusters has greatly enhanced the administration of affairs related to the expansion and consolidation of the community. When determining the boundaries of clusters, National Assemblies generally took into consideration such factors as culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants. Within the boundaries of a cluster the believers are able to interact with greater ease, to develop strong bonds of friendship, to serve together in common projects, to think about the growth of the Faith on a manageable scale, and to design and implement plans close to the grassroots of the community. As anticipated, other administrative processes of the Faith have not remained unaffected by such developments at the level of the cluster. In this regard, a number of National Assemblies have found it prudent to establish electoral units on the basis of cluster boundaries, thus drawing upon the positive dynamics generated by the expansion and consolidation of the community to reinforce and reinvigorate the electoral process related to unit conventions.

Over time, several aspects of this approach have become clear. In an area of a country with a relatively sparse Bahá'í population, a unit may include a number of clusters, while a cluster with a high population of believers might constitute a single unit, and perhaps even require the allocation of more than one delegate in accordance with the principle of proportionality. The House of Justice has followed with interest this approach to delineating electoral unit boundaries and urges all National Assemblies that have not done so to consider the viability of implementing it for the current year. The Assembly should ensure that the divisions, wherever possible, are made in such a way that each unit has at least one community with a well-established pattern of growth in which the unit convention can be held.

There may be cases where the National Assembly would need to apply other criteria—for example, in small countries with very few clusters, the manner of division outlined above may result in allocating a large number

of delegates to a single unit. In such instances, the area of jurisdiction of Local Spiritual Assemblies could be used as the boundary; however, under no circumstances should such a locality be divided between electoral units. In other cases, for example in countries that have several well-functioning communities situated far apart, a cluster could be divided into a number of separate units, or into several sub-units. If electoral units are divided into sub-units, it will be important to remember that the delegates to be elected represent the entire unit, and therefore each voter has all the adult believers resident in the entire unit to choose from.

In allocating delegates under the principle of proportionate representation—that is, in direct proportion to the number of adult believers residing in each unit—it would not be correct to use the degree of activity of the believers as a criterion. Beyond this, however, National Assemblies have a certain latitude in interpreting the information they have on the Bahá'í population in their countries. For instance, it is possible for them to maintain a list of believers with known addresses, and another list of those whose addresses are unknown. Maintaining two lists in this fashion does not reduce the figure for the total number of Bahá'ís, and the Assembly is then free to assign delegates according to the adult believers with known addresses. In those countries where a significant advance has been made in entering data into the Statistical Report Program, the population figures in the Program can be considered to be an accurate representation of the number of believers about whom information is known and used when allocating delegates to the electoral units.

It is the responsibility of the National Assembly to allocate delegates to units within the country and to decide all matters of detail regarding the methods and procedures by which the elections will take place in each unit. In countries where Regional Bahá'í Councils have been established, the National Assembly may ask them to oversee the arrangement of unit elections. Given that the Councils are well familiar with the realities of the communities within the region, they may also be requested to submit a proposal for the division of their regions into electoral units, including sub-units, for the review and approval of the National Assembly. In all countries, details related to the actual holding of unit conventions or sub-unit meetings are usually devolved to Local Assemblies. In the absence of a strong Local Assembly, this task may be entrusted to a committee.

An imperative for those responsible for organizing the unit convention is to ensure that all the adult believers residing in a unit are provided ample opportunity to cast their ballots for electing their delegate. In this regard, careful attention will need to be given to the choice of venue, including those for sub-unit conventions, in order to afford the friends easy access. As there are occasions when the friends gather to discuss the affairs of their community and the progress of the Cause, reflection meetings for example, consideration could be given to having the believers cast their ballots at a unit convention held on the same day as such meetings. For those friends who are unable to attend the unit convention, arrangements may be made to receive their ballots at the Nineteen Day Feast or a specially designated venue, or by mail. Ballots may also be accepted by telephone, email, text message, or online, if the institution overseeing the election is able to reliably identify the person who is voting and to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.

Everything possible should be done to ensure that delegates, once elected, attend the National Convention, where they carry out their responsibilities as summarized in the 16 May 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice. In some countries there may be formidable obstacles preventing full attendance, but the National Assembly can learn over time to facilitate maximum participation. For instance, the long distances some delegates must travel in order to attend the National Convention may create a financial burden they are unable to bear. In general in such cases, if a delegate is unable to pay his or her own travel costs, the believers from the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged to defray such expenses. If funds are unavailable from this source, delegates may approach the National Assembly to seek assistance; however, it would not be wise for an Assembly to apply a policy of fully reimbursing all the delegates. This would not prevent it, of course, from considering the situation of each delegate and deciding whether it could assist with his or her participation at National Convention. Those delegates who cannot attend should nevertheless exercise their spiritual obligation to vote for the membership of the incoming National Assembly.

Since the inception of the new series of Plans aimed at the systematic acceleration of the process of entry by troops, the community of the Greatest Name has gained much insight about the evolution of the Administrative Order in light of the principles enshrined in the Writings and the precious experience related to growth that has been accumulated in cities, towns, and villages in the four corners of the earth. A well-ordered electoral process



implemented in accordance with the Bahá'í Teachings is a key component of the healthy development of the institutions of the Faith. Unit conventions provide a venue to deepen the understanding of the friends about the unique nature of Bahá'í elections, and wholehearted participation in the election of delegates to the National Convention affords an opportunity for every responsible, conscientious believer to develop deeper bonds of love and enhance a spiritual connection with his or her National Spiritual Assembly. That the friends will come forward, in ever-increasing numbers, to perform this sacred obligation is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice. Rest assured of its prayers in the Holy Shrines that divine bestowals may accompany you in your diligent efforts towards this end.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat