

Baha'i Election Primer ^{*}

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March 5, 2012

With fiat currency (paper money) life-time expiring causing increasing political and economic chaos, the April, 2012, elections **for National Spiritual Assemblies** (NSAs) and the 2013 election of **The Universal House of Justice** (UHJ) in the Baha'i Administration may have enhanced importance for the well-being of the Baha'i community. The unique principles of Baha'i Administration and its election process may serve as a model to replace political corruption in numerous countries around the world. Efforts to promote these lofty principles are severely hampered by the reality that most major NSAs and the UHJ in the Baha'i world do not need elections of any kind, Baha'i or other, since NSA and UHJ members generally serve life terms, terminated only by death, disability or crime. As highlighted in "Universal House of Fear", Baha'is face the potentially embarrassing question of why their major NSAs and UHJ resemble an entrenched elite wielding power for life with a heavy hand which may be seen as similar to, if not exactly the same as, third-world dictators or leaders for life in some other religions. As reported in "Bondage by Baha'i Election", Baha'i voters do not appear to evaluate who might be best qualified at election time, but rather simply vote for whoever was elected previously, even if that original voter choice occurred many years or decades ago. Hence, a Baha'i election primer might be useful to Baha'i voters. This article summarizes some key guidelines for voters and agenda items for the upcoming national (2012) and international (2013) conventions and elections, including a ballot check-list.

Baha'i Voter Tasks

By their behavior, Baha'i voters have asserted for many years that the persons best qualified to serve as NSA and UHJ members never change. That between elections, nobody becomes more qualified or less qualified. As a result, elected members of major NSAs and of the UHJ generally serve for life, while secular populations in numerous countries risk their lives to remove dictators for life. This behavior appears to contradict voter guidelines in the Baha'i writings.

^{*} Posted as a sample chapter at https://bahai-library.com/keene_essays_bahai_topics . Purchase online at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B096WBTP44>

For example, Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Baha'i Faith (1921-1954), wrote on Baha'i elections:

...beware lest ... pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda ... should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught.

Nonetheless, Baha'i delegates to national and international conventions behave as if they want to say, "The corrupt politics of dictators and their show-case elections produce leaders for life, just like we do in the Baha'i community." Apparently, there is no desire to differentiate the Baha'i Administration from corrupt secular governments, which include some that imprison and kill their own citizens to remain in power.

And, as we know, absolute power corrupts. In recent years, on almost every continent, NSA members have been charged with serious crimes, often of a financial nature. Would this incidence of alleged criminal behavior by various NSA members be less if term limits were in place? In most of the documented cases, the offending NSA members have been in office for many years providing them with plenty of time to develop and perpetrate their illegal schemes, all thanks to Baha'i voters who seem to prefer to mimic the corrupt secular world. This trend adds a third reason for change in elected members of Baha'i institutions, namely that suspicion of a felony crime may be added to death and ill-health.

Shoghi Effendi further wrote:

On the election day, the friends must wholeheartedly 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...

...purity of spirit that can alone obtain our Beloved's most cherished desire.

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

Is "turning their hearts to God" with "purity of spirit" and "prayer and reflection" required for Baha'i voters to repeatedly elect the same persons for life? Or does Baha'i voter

behavior reflect failure to follow these guidelines? Baha'i voter behavior may be described as voting for incumbents because they are incumbents which may specifically violate guidance in the Baha'i writings. To wit, voters should rely on their own personal evaluations and not on "the reports and opinions of our friends", according to Shoghi Effendi. Note that being an incumbent is a report and opinion of prior voters in a previous election. Thus, voting for incumbents primarily because they are incumbents contradicts basic Baha'i election guidance.

On qualifications for election, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

...vote only in favour of those whom he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates...

...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....

The Assembly should be representative of the choicest and most varied and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.

Of course, none of these considerations are required if Baha'i voters simply vote for the same persons that were chosen in some previous election, often in the distant past.

Here is a quote not found in the Baha'i writings:

All of the guidance for Baha'i elections applies only for the first time a particular institution is elected. In all subsequent elections, purity, prayer and reflection are not needed since voters should simply re-elect incumbents for life.

Baha'i delegates behave as if this quote exists, but alas, it does not.

As presented in "Bondage by Baha'i Election", for major NSAs, defined as those with substantial numbers of Baha'is in their jurisdictions, it is likely that many dozens of persons meet basic qualifications to serve on an NSA and yet Baha'i voters seem to ignore this fact as well as the real possibility that many become more qualified or comparatively less qualified over the years. These changes in the Baha'i population would seem to

indicate changing NSA membership over the years, although mysteriously, this does not occur as might be expected. At the UHJ level, hundreds or even thousands of well-qualified Baha'is around the world are similarly ignored in favor of maintaining an elite leadership for life. Could this voter behavior be consistent with the guidelines of Shoghi Effendi and the vision of the Baha'i Faith founder, Baha'u'llah? Did these central figures of the Baha'i Faith hope that the Baha'i Administration would resemble corrupt secular governments where the same people may hold office for life, becoming a sort of elite class? Is this the example that Baha'i delegates wish to present to the world? Have Baha'i voters considered that their creation of an elite administrative class among Baha'is can have negative effects on the elected as well as on the Baha'i community? Have Baha'i voters in effect insisted that these questions be raised?

Views of Vote Recipients Affect Future Policy

The foregoing guidelines imply that Baha'i voters writing names on their ballots are free to consider whatever details about specific individuals that their "prayer and reflection" deem relevant. Baha'i voters as an aggregate may not have exercised their great power to determine elected members of NSAs and the UHJ in each election cycle and to thereby determine the direction of future administrative policies. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi urged voters "to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications..." If so inclined, delegates should become informed of views of fellow Baha'is on matters such as term limits and other potentially controversial issues. It is entirely proper that this information may affect voting and therefore influence future administrative policy on these issues.

If delegates do not know the views of fellow Baha'is on key current issues, including controversial items, are they voting blind according to this component of Shoghi Effendi's guidance? Do Baha'is who are not delegates inform the delegates of their views? Are the views of incumbents on specific issues of interest to the voters known and if not, why?

In sum, Baha'i elections provide a grass-roots mechanism to set the direction of administrative decisions by election of people based in part on their known views. This aspect of the election process is consistent with the very high regard for the capabilities of individuals in the Baha'i community (the grass-roots), seen throughout the Baha'i writings.

Instant Term Limits

In theory, if ballots were cast without any incumbent names, term limits would be instantly implemented. This might be an excellent do-it-yourself (DIY) project for convention delegates.

Many advantages might be mentioned. For example, incumbent members of NSAs and of the UHJ may have already had ample time to present their ideas and expertise to the respective administrative bodies. In the case of the UHJ, if the five year terms of office are not long enough, then how long does it take for a member to present their new or creative ideas? With new members, new ideas and a new creative impulse can find representation in the Baha'i Administration. Without instant term limits, stagnation in policy, rigidity in thinking and as mentioned, even corruption can infect the elected body.

This point seems to be so obvious that opposing viewpoints are welcome, so readers can consider any valid points. Meanwhile, Baha'i voters are urged to investigate the qualifications including the "views" of fellow Baha'is for NSA and UHJ elections. Recent administrative actions may be assumed to reflect the views on the subject matter of a majority of incumbents. Are these views consistent with the current wisdom of delegates at election time? Does lack of action on term limits suggest that incumbents may be subject to a conflict of interest regarding a desire to be administrative elites for life? If so, are such incumbents truly qualified?

Convention Agendas

Canvassing and campaigning for specific individuals is not allowed in the Baha'i election process. This teaching emphasizes the need for individual voters to independently investigate the human resources available for election, which leads to possible convention agenda items and ballot check-lists.

Delegates may add some of the following items to their national and international convention agendas:

1. Can delegates set their own convention agenda rather than be restricted to consultation on pre-prepared plans?
2. Does the annual report emphasize objectives achieved or names of people (which might suggest campaigning)?

3. What specific steps has the NSA or UHJ taken to ensure freedom of expression, especially for Baha'is with unusual or unconventional viewpoints, and to protect those Baha'is from religious persecution by appointed or elected Baha'i institutions?
4. What specific steps has the NSA or UHJ taken regarding the remedies suggested in "Purge Cover-Up"?
5. Has the NSA or UHJ implemented specific term limits for their elected members?
6. Has the NSA or UHJ purchased property which is now "underwater" due to falling real estate prices?
7. Has the NSA or UHJ paid off all bank loans?
8. Has the NSA or UHJ removed all funds from banks except those needed for transactions in the coming quarter?
9. Has the NSA or UHJ set up a good Central Bank as described in "Build a Central Bank in Your Kitchen", especially for endowment funds?

These agenda suggestions are based on recent Independent articles and as such represent a small sample of appropriate convention agenda items.

Ballot Check-Lists

Actual agenda items chosen by convention delegates may also serve as ballot check-lists in the elections. For example, if delegates favor term limits, persons with a similar outlook might tend to receive more votes. In short, Baha'i voters may influence future policy of the Baha'i Administration by electing qualified persons known to be willing and able to move policy in a particular direction. Stagnation and lack of policy change may be expected if incumbents receive the most votes. In the case of term limits, incumbents who prefer the perks and power of holding office for life, until terminated by death, disability or crime, may no longer be seen by delegates as being best qualified.

For elected NSA and UHJ members who have already served for an ample time, the voter might ask, "Why has this person not resigned so others can serve as members of these administrative bodies?"