

# Administration, Bahá'í

*International system, originating in Bahá'í scripture, that governs the affairs of the Bahá'í Faith, which has no clergy and no professional learned class; a framework based on elected councils that hold legislative, executive, and judicial authority and on appointed individuals whose role is to protect, advise, and influence the Bahá'í community; the embryonic form of the future world order envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>1</sup>*

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## FOUNDATIONS OF BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATION

### Origins

The system of Bahá'í administration has its origins in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and is regarded by Bahá'ís as having been divinely ordained. It is distinguished from other religious or secular forms of government by the fact that "Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word [See: 'Abdu'l-Bahá], and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances [the [Universal House of Justice](#)]."<sup>2</sup>

The primary documents on which the Bahá'í Administrative Order is based are: (1) the [Kitáb-i-Aqdas](#) , the "Mother Book" of the Bahá'í Faith, in which Bahá'u'lláh lays down the laws and principles by which the operation of the administration must be governed; (2) Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Carmel ([Lawh-i-Karmil](#) ) , which [Shoghi Effendi](#), the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, calls "the Charter of the World Spiritual and Administrative

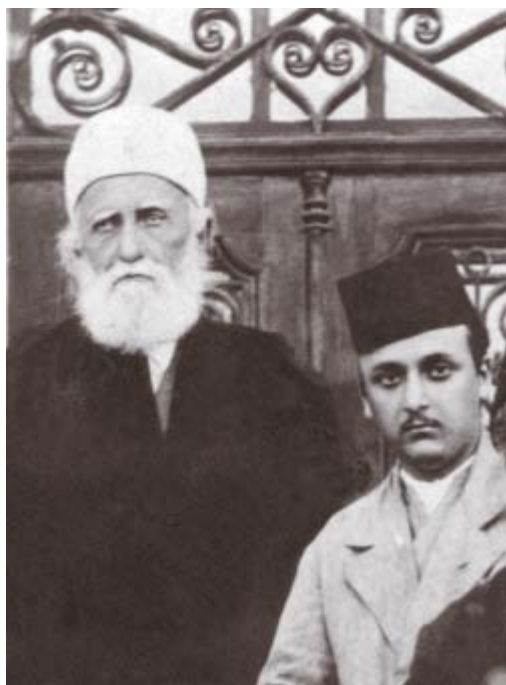
Centers of the Faith" on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel;<sup>3</sup> (3) the Book of the Covenant ([Kitáb-i-'Ahd](#) ) ,<sup>4</sup> in which Bahá'u'lláh institutes His Covenant with the Bahá'ís, "to guide and assist" in laying the foundations of the Bahá'í order and "to safeguard the unity of its builders,"<sup>5</sup> and affirms the appointment of His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of the Covenant; and (4) the [Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá](#) , described by Shoghi Effendi as "The Charter which called into being, outlined the features and set in motion the processes of, this Administrative Order,"<sup>6</sup> among which are the establishment of the institution of the Guardianship and the appointment of Shoghi Effendi. The writings of Shoghi Effendi, particularly [The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh](#)  and [Bahá'í Administration](#) , in which he guides the development of Bahá'í administration, elucidate the overarching principles laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in these primary documents.

## The Covenant

The integrity of the Administrative Order is sustained by adherence to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Since unity is the hallmark of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the purpose of the Covenant is to preserve unity

of belief and action and to protect the Bahá'í Faith from schism while ensuring the systematic realization of its spiritual, social, and humanitarian principles as the basis for a global civilization. Central to Bahá'í belief, the Covenant is an understanding by which the members of the Bahá'í community accept the station and authority of Bahá'u'lláh as the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation in which the unity of humanity is the pivotal principle and ultimate goal. To fulfill this principle, Bahá'u'lláh has made specific provisions in His writings. Preeminent among them are the designation, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, of the principle of hereditary succession; 'Abdu'l-Bahá's appointment, in the *Book of the Covenant*, as the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the interpreter of His teachings; and the ordination, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, of the Universal House of Justice as the supreme governing and legislative organ of the Administrative Order.

As the Center of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá occupies a unique office in religious history. His ministry (1892–1921) formed a part of what Shoghi Effendi has termed "the Heroic, [or] the Apostolic Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh," the period in which its Founders and early heroes lived and in which its foundations were established.<sup>7</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry also effected a transition between the Heroic Age of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation and the Formative or Iron Age, in which local, national, and international institutions of the Bahá'í Faith "were to take shape, develop and become fully consolidated, in anticipation of the third, the last, the Golden Age destined to witness the emergence of a world-embracing Order."<sup>8</sup>



'Abdu'l-Bahá, left, and His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, in a photograph taken in 1919. Haifa, Israel. © Bahá'í International Community. [Bahá'í Media Bank](#)

The literature of the Bahá'í Faith mentions two forms of Covenant. One is the Covenant that every Prophet makes with His followers: that they will accept the future Prophet (Bahá'u'lláh states that a new Prophet will follow Him after the expiration of no less than one thousand years). The second type of Covenant pertains to the succession of authority. Bahá'u'lláh has made a Covenant with His people that they should accept 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Interpreter and Exemplar of His teachings; "Under the same category falls the Covenant the Master ['Abdu'l-Bahá] made with the Bahá'ís that they should accept His administration after Him."<sup>9</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly outlines the form of this administration in His Will and Testament, which Shoghi Effendi describes as "His greatest legacy to posterity, the brightest emanation of His mind and the mightiest instrument forged to insure the continuity of the three ages which constitute the component parts of His Father's Dispensation."<sup>10</sup>

## The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice

The Guardianship is explicitly established in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but Shoghi Effendi indicates that it is also anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.<sup>11</sup> The Universal House of Justice is ordained by Bahá'u'lláh, and the method of its establishment is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will and Testament. According to the Will and Testament, both the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are protected and guided by the *Báb* and Bahá'u'lláh. The provisions of the Will and Testament make it clear that the interpretations of the Guardian, functioning in his own sphere, and the enactments of the Universal House of Justice are binding: "Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God."<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the Guardianship, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that, after His passing, it is incumbent upon the Bahá'ís to turn to Shoghi Effendi—"the sign of God, the chosen branch, the guardian of the Cause of

God" and "the expounder of the words of God"—and, after Shoghi Effendi, to "the first-born of his lineal descendents."<sup>13</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the Universal House of Justice, "which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error," is to be "elected by universal suffrage" among the Bahá'ís. Its members are to be knowledgeable, steadfast, and "the well-wishers of all mankind." The Universal House of Justice is responsible for enacting "all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text."<sup>14</sup>

The [Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá](#) complements the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in the ordination of the institutions. For example, the provision for interpretation of the Bahá'í scripture is extended through the appointment of the Guardian as successor to 'Abdu'l-Bahá; the relationship of the Guardian to the Universal House of Justice is explained; the method of establishing the Universal House of Justice is outlined; the institution of the secondary Houses of Justice (at present known as National Spiritual Assemblies) is announced; and the institution of the [Hands of the Cause of God](#), initiated by Bahá'u'lláh through His appointment of eminent Bahá'ís to promote spreading the Bahá'í Faith and to assure its protection, is confirmed and amplified in its role as an auxiliary of the Guardianship.

Thus, as Shoghi Effendi points out in a broad overview of the purpose of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have "in unequivocal and emphatic language, appointed those twin institutions of the House of Justice and of the Guardianship as their chosen Successors" and have given them mutually reinforcing roles: "to apply the principles, promulgate the laws, protect the institutions, adapt loyally and intelligently the Faith to the requirements of progressive society, and consummate the incorruptible inheritance which the Founders of the Faith have bequeathed to the world."<sup>15</sup> Writing further of the complementarity of the functions of these "twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh," Shoghi Effendi explains:

Their common, their fundamental object is to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings. Acting in conjunction with each other these two inseparable institutions administer its affairs, coördinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions. Severally, each operates within a clearly defined sphere of jurisdiction; each is equipped with its own attendant institutions—instruments designed for the effective discharge of its particular responsibilities and duties.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of the mutuality of the functions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice, Shoghi Effendi categorically asserts that "Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other." As member and permanent head of the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian could not, "even temporarily, assume the right of exclusive legislation," nor could he "override the decision of the majority of his fellow-members," but he would be "bound to insist upon a reconsideration by them of any enactment he conscientiously believes to conflict with the meaning and to depart from the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's revealed utterances." Moreover, he was "debarred from laying down independently the constitution that must govern the organized activities of his fellow-members."<sup>17</sup>

Shoghi Effendi's ministry lasted for thirty-six years (1921–57), ending with his death six years before the first election of the Universal House of Justice, which took place according to his plans and expectations. The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets out the conditions for the appointment of a successor by the sitting Guardian. These conditions became impossible to fulfill during the lifetime of Shoghi Effendi. As he had produced no progeny, and there was no eligible heir, Shoghi Effendi did not appoint a successor. The Universal House of Justice announced in a message on 6 October 1963 its finding "that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi."<sup>18</sup>

## The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice

Throughout his ministry, [Shoghi Effendi](#) spelled out the principles by which the administration of the Faith should be guided and urged the Bahá'ís to apply them, but he made it clear that it would be the function of the [Universal House of Justice](#) "to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration" of the Faith.<sup>19</sup>

On 26 November 1972 the Universal House of Justice adopted its constitution, which identifies the current units of Bahá'í Administrative Order and defines their methods of operation. Comprising two major parts, a declaration of trust and bylaws, the constitution expresses recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as "the Source of Authority"; acknowledges His Covenant, which continues to fulfill its purpose through the agency of the Universal House of Justice; affirms that the provenance, authority, duties, and sphere of action of the Universal House of Justice all derive from the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh and the interpretations and expositions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi; identifies its position as Head of the Faith, "There being no successor to Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God;"<sup>20</sup> and details the powers and duties invested in the Universal House of Justice.



*The entrance to the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, the home of the Bahá'í Faith's international governing body. Date: 2005-03-21. Haifa, Israel. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

The bylaws specify the basis for membership in the Bahá'í community and outline the basic structure of the administration. The preamble to the bylaws describes the Universal House of Justice as "the supreme institution of an Administrative Order" consisting, "on the one hand, of a series of elected councils, universal, secondary and local, in which are vested legislative, executive and judicial powers over the Bahá'í community and, on the other, of eminent and devoted believers appointed for the specific purposes of protecting and propagating the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh under the guidance of the Head of that Faith."<sup>21</sup> The bylaws state the obligations of members of these councils; describe the methods of Bahá'í election; uphold the right of appeal of individuals against actions of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, and specify the procedures for such appeals and also for appeals by Local Spiritual Assemblies against decisions of National Spiritual Assemblies. They also assert the right of the Universal House of Justice to review action by any Spiritual Assembly and to approve, modify, or reverse such action.

## The "Rulers" and the "Learned" in the Bahá'í Administrative Order

In the Book of the Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh identifies as "the rulers and the learned" the two distinctive components of the Administrative Order that are described in the constitution of the Universal House of Justice.<sup>22</sup> Shoghi Effendi explains, in a message written in 1931, that "'the learned' are, on the one hand, the Hands of the Cause of God, and, on the other, the teachers and diffusers of His teachings who do not rank as Hands, but who have attained an eminent position in the teaching work. As to the 'rulers' they refer to the members of the Local, National and International Houses of Justice. The duties of each of these souls will be determined in the future."<sup>23</sup> These "duties"—and the various institutions to which they are assigned—were largely outlined or envisioned by Shoghi Effendi during his ministry. They are now defined in the constitution of the Universal House of Justice and are amplified in communications of the Universal House of Justice as circumstances require; an example is the statement entitled *The Institution of the Counsellors*, issued in January 2001 (See Section: [Institutions of Bahá'í Administration](#).[The Institution of the Counselors](#)).



The "rulers" comprise the administrative and governing authority that begins at the local level with the Local Spiritual Assembly and flows upward to culminate in the Universal House of Justice. These institutions at various levels (local, national, international) are all, without exception, corporate, democratically elected bodies with a prescribed term of office.

The "learned" includes the institutions of the Hands of the Cause and the Counselors. The members of these institutions are appointed and carry out their functions primarily as individuals. The Hands of the Cause, all now deceased, retained their appointments for life; the members of the institution of the Counselors are appointed for a given term. "The existence of institutions of such exalted rank," the Universal House of Justice asserts, "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."<sup>24</sup> The functions of protection and propagation are performed by the institution of the Counselors in a collaborative and supportive manner with the elected governing bodies at the various administrative levels. This collaboration takes such forms as consultation on the plans and progress of the Bahá'í Faith between members of this institution and the elected bodies; acts of leadership in the teaching work—initiating activities, providing advice, and offering moral and practical support being among them; as well as mutually reinforcing efforts toward protecting the Faith from schism and attack.



Seat of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Center Building, Haifa, Israel, 2001.  
*Bahá'í Photographic Library*

By giving legislative and governing authority to elected councils and rank and moral authority to the institutions of the Hands of the Cause and the Counselors, the Bahá'í Administrative Order embodies beneficial elements that were formerly part of the priestly role, yet it avoids the pitfalls of clericalism. "The

newness and uniqueness of this concept make it difficult to grasp," the Universal House of Justice explains, for "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 the 'rulers' and 'learned' in the Faith be properly understood, and the inestimable value of their interaction be fully recognized."<sup>25</sup>

## **INSTITUTIONS OF BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATION**

### **Local Spiritual Assemblies**

The Local Spiritual Assembly was called into existence by Bahá'u'lláh: "The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counselors to the number of Bahá [nine]."<sup>26</sup> Thus, in any civil locality where the number of resident Bahá'í adults is nine or more, they convene on 21 April, the first day of the Ridván festival—a twelve-day period celebrated annually to commemorate Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of His mission—and form a local administrative body of nine members known as the "Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of" that locality. Shoghi Effendi explains that *Spiritual Assembly* is a "temporary appellation" that will eventually be "superseded" by the "designation of House of Justice."<sup>27</sup> At each subsequent Ridván, an annual meeting is held, at which the Bahá'ís consult on the reports of the Local Spiritual Assembly and its committees and exercise their right to

offer recommendations to the Assembly and to elect the Assembly for a one-year term.

The Local Spiritual Assembly has full jurisdiction over all Bahá'í activities and affairs within its locality; it functions in accordance with the powers and duties set forth in the constitution of the Local Spiritual Assembly. Its duties include directing the expansion and consolidation of the community through teaching the Faith; spiritual training; protecting the Faith; aiding the needy; educating children; and arranging for regular meetings, Nineteen Day Feasts (See Section: [Institutions of Bahá'í Administration. The Nineteen Day Feast](#)), and commemorations of Bahá'í



*Alvin Blum (back row third from left) and Gertrude Blum (front row second from left) with other members of first Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Honiara, 1957. Solomon Islands. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

anniversaries. The Assembly attends to personal difficulties of community members and resolves disputes. It can be assisted by committees annually appointed by it to study and take action, at its direction, in various areas of Bahá'í activity for which the Assembly is responsible. Though invested with "an authority rendering them unanswerable for their acts and decisions to those who elect them,"<sup>28</sup> Spiritual Assemblies must take the members of their communities into their confidence, familiarize them with their plans and activities, and invite any recommendations the members might wish to make.

Local Spiritual Assemblies are supported by local funds to which believers voluntarily contribute. Meetings of a Spiritual Assembly open with prayer. Decisions are reached through the process of consultation (See Section: [Principles of Bahá'í Administration. Elections and Consultation](#)). The Assembly seeks to communicate frequently with the Bahá'ís under its jurisdiction, principally through publishing newsletters and bulletins and through the holding of the Nineteen Day Feast.

## The Nineteen Day Feast

The Nineteen Day Feast—an essential function of local community life, the holding of which is a major responsibility of the Local Spiritual Assembly—derives from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas its existence as an institution. The format of the meeting, as described by the Universal House of Justice, consists of "three distinct but related parts: the devotional, the administrative, and the social." Prayers and readings "from the Holy Texts" precede "a general meeting where the Local Spiritual Assembly reports its activities, plans and problems to the community, shares news and messages from the World Center [See: [Bahá'í World Center](#)] and the National Assembly, and receives the thoughts and recommendations of the friends through a process of consultation." The administrative portion of the Nineteen Day Feast is followed by "partaking of refreshments and engaging in other activities meant to foster fellowship in a culturally determined diversity of forms which do not violate principles of the Faith or the essential character of the Feast."<sup>29</sup> The Feast is normally held on the first day of each Bahá'í month.

## National Spiritual Assemblies

The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "in all countries a secondary House of Justice must be instituted."<sup>30</sup> At present known as a *National Spiritual Assembly*, this institution bears administrative authority for the Bahá'í Faith in its area. Its responsibility is "to stimulate, unify and coordinate by frequent personal consultations" the activities of individual Bahá'ís as well as Local Assemblies and, "by keeping in close . . . touch" with the Bahá'í World Center, to "direct . . . the affairs" of the Bahá'í Faith in its area of jurisdiction.<sup>31</sup> The powers and duties of the National Spiritual Assembly are detailed in its

constitution.

A National Spiritual Assembly is formed in an area and at a time designated by the Universal House of Justice. Although in general the area of responsibility of a National Spiritual Assembly is coextensive with an independent nation, this is not always the case. A Spiritual Assembly may, as determined by the Universal House of Justice, exercise jurisdiction over a region comprising two or more contiguous states until each is strong enough to sustain its own National Assembly. This was so, for example, for Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, where Bahá'ís functioned for several years under the jurisdiction of a Regional Spiritual Assembly until a National Spiritual Assembly was established in each country in 1998. The formation of Regional Spiritual Assemblies offers a number of advantages. To name a few, it provides for and encourages evolutionary development of the Bahá'í administrative system; it accounts for a measure of involvement and training of undersized Bahá'í populations in administration on a large scale; and it stimulates the national aspirations of grassroots communities in countries where the Bahá'í populations are not yet strong enough to make the formation of independent National Assemblies viable.

In other situations a large country may be divided into separate jurisdictions, each with its own National Spiritual Assembly. Among the considerations that dictate such a division is the need to avoid the consequences of overcentralizing administrative functions. An example is the configuration of a country like the United States, with its fifty widely scattered states, in which three separate National Assemblies have been established—one for the mainland, one for the state of Alaska, and one for the state of Hawaii. Yet, because of the spirit of unity underlying Bahá'í activities, the existence of the three National Spiritual Assemblies does not interfere with the national identity of the populations they serve. The various arrangements of jurisdiction among National Assemblies reflect the flexibility inherent in the Bahá'í system of administration.



*The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. From left to right: H. Borrah Kavelin, Mamie Seto, W. Kenneth Christian, Elsie Austin, Paul Haney, Edna True, Horace Holley, Dorothy Baker, Matthew Bullock. April 1953. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

The National Spiritual Assembly results from a two-stage election: the Bahá'ís of a country or designated region elect their delegates, and the delegates in turn elect nine adult Bahá'ís resident in that territory to be the members of the National Spiritual Assembly. The election of the National Assembly occurs at an annual national convention usually held during the period of the Ridván festival. The other principal business of the convention is consultation on Bahá'í activities, plans, and policies. Vacancies on the National Assembly that may occur during the year are filled by means of a by-election involving the delegates to the previous convention.

The obligations of members of both National and Local Spiritual Assemblies have been set out by Shoghi Effendi and are summarized in the constitution of the Universal House of Justice:

to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve; to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments and the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote; to purge their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs of self-contained aloofness, the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness and of every word and deed that may savour of partiality, self-centredness and prejudice; and while

retaining the sacred right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, ventilate grievances, welcome advice and foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between themselves and all other Bahá'ís.<sup>32</sup>

The National Spiritual Assembly represents its community in relation to its national government and to other national Bahá'í communities. It is "the sole link that binds" the national community to the Universal House of Justice.<sup>33</sup> The members of all National Spiritual Assemblies elect directly the Universal House of Justice (See Section: [Institutions of Bahá'í Administration. The Universal House of Justice](#)).

The seat of the National Spiritual Assembly is the *Hazíratu'l-Quds* (Arabic: the Sacred Fold), which consists of a number of component parts. Shoghi Effendi specifies that these may include a secretariat, a treasury, an archives, a library, a publishing office, an assembly hall, a council chamber, and a pilgrims' hostel. The functions of the *Hazíratu'l-Quds* are complementary to those of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* or House of Worship, which has its own attendant institutions.

### ***Decentralization: National Committees***

The National Spiritual Assembly is charged with maintaining a balance between centralization and decentralization of its work. It carries out many of its functions and responsibilities through committees it appoints. According to Shoghi Effendi, "the role of these committees set up by the National Spiritual Assembly, the renewal, the membership and functions of which should be reconsidered separately each year by the incoming National Assembly, is chiefly to make thorough and expert study of the issue entrusted to their charge, advise by their reports, and assist in the execution of the decisions which in vital matters are to be exclusively and directly rendered by the National Assembly."<sup>34</sup>

### ***Decentralization: Regional Bahá'í Councils***

To extend the measure of decentralization of the national administration, the Universal House of Justice announced in 1997 that Regional Bahá'í Councils may be formed, with its approval, in countries where this "new element of Bahá'í administration" is warranted.<sup>35</sup> The institution of the Regional Council operates within a range beyond that allowed a national committee. The functions of a Regional Council and the degree of authority conferred on it are within the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly. The Council's responsibilities include carrying out policies of the Assembly, supervising the smooth and efficient execution of the plans and projects of its region, taking initiative in promoting the Bahá'í Faith, and executing its decisions within the wide latitude of autonomous action allowed it by the National Assembly. Collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies and Bahá'ís in its area of jurisdiction is essential to its work. It regularly informs the National Assembly of its activities and of the condition of the Faith throughout its region. A Regional Council generally comes into existence through the election of nine persons by the members of all the Local Spiritual Assemblies in its region; in some instances the National Assembly may decide on a membership of seven or even five or may appoint the members from a slate of candidates recommended by the Local Spiritual Assemblies in the region. The Regional Council is authorized to appoint committees to assist with its work.

### **The Universal House of Justice**

The Universal House of Justice consists of nine men elected for a term of five years at the international Bahá'í convention, which takes place in the vicinity of the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, during the period of the Ridván festival. A vacancy on the Universal House of Justice is filled by the calling of a by-election, unless in the judgment of the Universal House of Justice this falls too close to the time of the regular election for the entire membership. The electors comprise all currently serving members of



National Spiritual Assemblies.

In its second message to the Bahá'í community, written shortly after its election in 1963, the Universal House of Justice declared that "It has no officers."<sup>36</sup> According to its constitution, the Universal House of Justice conducts its business through consultation by the full membership, except that it may from time to time provide for quorums of less than the full membership for specific classes of business.



*The Seat of the Universal House of Justice. Haifa, Israel. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

The Universal House of Justice functions from its Seat on Mount Carmel in Haifa in close proximity to the Shrine of the Báb. The juxtaposition of these two structures, one representing the administrative and the other the spiritual center of a world community, symbolically fulfills the expectation expressed by Bahá'u'lláh on two visits to Mount Carmel. One visit was marked by His proclamation of the sacredness of the place and His forecast of the imminence of significant developments there. Recorded as the Tablet of Carmel, His pronouncement on this occasion has been described by Shoghi Effendi as the charter establishing the World Center of the Bahá'í Faith. The other visit was marked by Bahá'u'lláh's pointing out to 'Abdu'l-Bahá the spot where the remains of the Báb, His slain Forerunner, ultimately should be interred. Through these separate but related events, Bahá'u'lláh fixed the pivot of the operation of the community that would be raised in His name.

The Seat of the Universal House of Justice is situated at the apex of an arc traced by Shoghi Effendi to mark the positioning of the complex of buildings housing the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith at its World Center (See: Bahá'í World Center. Development under the Universal House of Justice). Besides the Seat, this complex includes the Center for the Study of the Texts, the International Teaching Center Building, the International Bahá'í

Archives, and the International Bahá'í Library. To facilitate the conduct of the internal affairs of the Bahá'í Faith, the House of Justice has set up a number of departments and offices at the World Center. For external affairs it has various offices functioning under the rubric *Bahá'í International Community*. These include a secretariat in Haifa; the United Nations Office in New York, with its branch in Geneva and offices elsewhere; an Office of Public Information that operates primarily from its headquarters in Haifa; and in New York an Office for the Advancement of Women.

## **The Institution of the Counselors**

The members of the International Teaching Center and of the Continental Boards of Counselors established by the Universal House of Justice are designated collectively as the institution of the Counselors. The Hands of the Cause of God appointed by Shoghi Effendi between 1951 and 1957 had primary responsibility for the protection and propagation of the Bahá'í Faith. In the performance of their duties they were to consult with and advise National Spiritual Assemblies concerning the expansion and consolidation of the Faith and to protect it against schism. They traveled extensively, educating the Bahá'í community about the religion and stimulating its members to action.

The death of Shoghi Effendi made impossible the further appointment of Hands of the Cause. Therefore, in 1968, the Universal House of Justice brought into being the institution of the Continental Boards of Counselors "to extend into the future the specific functions of protection and propagation conferred upon the Hands of the Cause."<sup>37</sup> Each of the five Boards of Counselors currently operates within a continental zone: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, and Europe. The Universal House of Justice

appoints a Counselor for a term of five years. Because of the high administrative rank she or he occupies, a Counselor is not eligible for election to local or national administrative bodies; "If elected to the Universal House of Justice he ceases to be a Counselor."<sup>38</sup>

The work of the Counselors is carried out through the operation of two Auxiliary Boards in each continent, one for protection and one for propagation. Auxiliary Board members are appointed by and serve under the direction of the Continental Boards of Counselors. As deputies of the Counselors, Auxiliary Board members are assigned specific areas in which to serve. Their term of appointment is five years. The Auxiliary Board members appoint assistants at the local level, usually for a one-year term.

In clarifying the distinction between the work of the Continental Boards of Counselors and the Auxiliary Boards, on the one hand, and the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, on the other, the Universal House of Justice has stated that "Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers"; that it is "the principal task of the Auxiliary Boards to assist in arousing and releasing this power"; that, "if they are to be able to perform it adequately they must avoid becoming involved in the work of administration"; that the Auxiliary Boards "work closely with the grass roots of the community: the individual believers, groups and Local Spiritual Assemblies, advising, stimulating and assisting them"; that "The Counselors are responsible for stimulating, counseling and assisting National Spiritual Assemblies, and also work with individuals, groups and Local Assemblies"; and that the plans of Assemblies "should be well known to the Counselors and Auxiliary Board members, because one of the ways in which they can assist the Assemblies is by urging the believers continually to support the plans of the Assemblies."<sup>39</sup>

Although Counselors and Auxiliary Board members consult with the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies about teaching plans, they do not administer the teaching work, nor do they adjudicate in personal cases, for these fall within the sphere of responsibility of Spiritual Assemblies; however, "Counselors and Auxiliary Board members should watch and report on . . . the proper working of the administrative institutions." When an Auxiliary Board member determines that a Local Spiritual Assembly is not functioning correctly, he or she "should call its attention to the appropriate texts"; and "if the Counselors find that a National Spiritual Assembly is not functioning properly," they are duty bound to point this out to the Assembly, assisting it to overcome the problem.<sup>40</sup>

In 1973 a new institution designated as the International Teaching Center was established at the Bahá'í World Center "To coordinate, stimulate and direct the activities of the Continental Boards of Counselors and to act as liaison between them and the Universal House of Justice."<sup>41</sup> It also remains alert to the conditions of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world and, on the basis of its observations, makes reports and recommendations to the Universal House of Justice and advises the Continental Boards of Counselors.

The membership of the International Teaching Center consists at present of nine Counselors, who are appointed to a term of five years. The Hands of the Cause—as permanent members throughout their lifetimes, retaining the right to request and attend meetings as they wished—were



*Members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and their Auxiliary Board members at the January 2001 inauguration of the International Teaching Centre Building. Date: 16 January 2001. Haifa, Israel. Photographer: Ineta Alvarado. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

able to participate in the functioning of the International Teaching Center during the first decades of its existence. Meanwhile, the Counselor members handled the regular work of the institution through consultation among themselves and at times with the Hands. These operational arrangements freed the Hands of the Cause from day-to-day administrative duties while preserving their prerogatives in influencing the development of the International Teaching Center.

## PRINCIPLES OF BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATION

### Elections and Consultation

The principles regarding elections and consultation are among the most distinctive features of Bahá'í administration. Campaigning and nominations are strictly avoided in any Bahá'í election. A silent and prayerful atmosphere prevails. Electors act entirely independently in voting by secret ballot and in selecting, as called for in the Bahá'í writings, only those whom conscience prompts them to uphold.<sup>42</sup> With the exception of Hands of the Cause (until 2007, when the last of the Hands of the Cause died) and Counselors, all adult Bahá'ís in good standing are eligible for election to Local and National Assemblies; eligibility for election to the Universal House of Justice is restricted to adult males.

In voting—"without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration"—for members of any Bahá'í institution, the elector looks for the qualifications of "unquestioned loyalty, . . . selfless devotion, . . . a well-trained mind, . . . recognized ability and mature experience."<sup>43</sup> All Bahá'í elections, except elections for officers of Assemblies and committees, are by plurality vote taken by secret ballot. The election of officers of a Spiritual Assembly or committee is by majority vote of the Assembly or committee, taken by secret ballot.

Bahá'u'lláh's call to Assembly members to "take counsel together" implies that decisions must be made through consultation.<sup>44</sup> Averring that "In all things it is necessary to consult," Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly and variously emphasizes the importance of consultation, extolling it as "a cause of awareness and of awakening," the "bestower of understanding," and "a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth."<sup>45</sup> Shoghi Effendi affirms that "Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order."<sup>46</sup> He also states that the principle of consultation is a basic law of Bahá'í administration and is applied to all Bahá'í activities that affect the collective interests of the Faith.

'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates on the process of consultation by enumerating the requisites for participants: love and harmony, purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, humility, and patience and long-suffering in difficulties. While striving for truth and unity of thought, the participants should freely express their opinions, observing courtesy, dignity, and moderation in their modes of expression. They should neither stubbornly insist on their own views nor belittle the opinions of others; none should have hurt feelings because of opposing opinions, for "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions."<sup>47</sup> Having satisfied themselves that all views have been expressed and the relevant law or principle considered, the members reach a decision either unanimously or by majority vote. In the case of a majority vote, the minority subsequently joins the majority in upholding the decision, since to object to or censure a decision thus made violates the spirit of consultation. In such a spirit of detachment, a united position prevails; in that same spirit, a decision is changed if it is seen later to be wrong.

Through election, the members of a Spiritual Assembly derive the right to exercise collectively the authority conferred on the institution by Bahá'u'lláh; and, through consultation, the Assembly as a corporate entity makes decisions that are authoritative and thus binding on the community under its jurisdiction. A distinctive aspect of Bahá'í administration in this context is that authority is not personal. In fulfilling their responsibilities as elected or appointed officers, or otherwise as designated agents of the Assembly, individuals exercise executive authority as allowed by the Assembly, but the Assembly retains the right to review, approve, and correct the actions of such individuals.



*One of the delegates casting her vote in May 2005 for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South Africa. May 2005. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank*

But beyond the mechanics and functional objectives of a Bahá'í election are the sense of sacredness and the commitment to unity that pervade its conduct. The attitude of the Bahá'í community, in this respect, is shaped by a belief that, since the system of Bahá'í administration originates in the holy writings of the Faith, it is a divine creation and not simply a means devised by human beings to meet the practical necessities of organization. Voters, therefore, approach their task by fostering an atmosphere of prayer and reflection devoid of campaigning and are guided in their choices by an unencumbered conscience "exercised in private in an attitude that invites communion with the Holy Spirit."<sup>48</sup> Consequently, they regard the results as fulfilling the will of God; and those so elected are held to be answerable to that same will and not just to their electorate. "An election thus conducted," the Universal House of Justice avers, "portrays an aspect of that organic unity of the inner and outer realities of human life which is necessary to the construction of a mature society in this new Age. In no other system do individuals exercise such a breadth of freedom in the electoral process."<sup>49</sup>

## **Distinguishing Characteristics of Bahá'í Administration**

The fact that the system of Bahá'í administration is a direct provision of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and not an innovation imposed by conditions after His passing, is of unique and critical importance. The essentiality of the Administrative Order is upheld by Bahá'í law as borne out in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, in which Bahá'u'lláh calls attention to "this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."<sup>50</sup> It is the designated instrument for the realization of the Bahá'í teachings. Its indispensability to the very existence of the Faith is made plain in Shoghi Effendi's categorical statement that "To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself."<sup>51</sup>

It is clear, then, that the Bahá'í system of administration is distinguished by its origin in the laws enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh; by the unifying provisions of His Covenant; by the authority conferred on 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the authorized interpreters of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose, and on the Universal House of Justice, the institution designated to supplement and apply His laws; by the balance struck in the system between centralization and decentralization; by the democratic methods applied in creating and maintaining the institutions, which are not answerable for their acts to those who elect them but are responsive to their counsel and advice; by the spirit of the functioning of the Administrative Order, including its freedom from factionalism and partisanship; and by the flexibility the Universal House of Justice employs in making and abrogating its own enactments in accordance with the exigencies of the times. An example of this flexibility is the recent introduction to the administration of teaching of measures to meet current conditions. The object has been to decentralize by dividing a country into units comprising incorporated or nonincorporated localities of a range that make for manageable clusters. A teaching committee and a permanent regional institute are assigned to each cluster to ensure that the process of community building resulting from the expansion and consolidation of Bahá'í membership is effected through the constancy of study circles, devotional meetings, children's classes, and junior youth programs. The functioning of these agencies is coordinated by a Regional Bahá'í Council, in countries where such councils exist, and also benefits from a consultative relationship with the institution of the Counselors. Such a development is to continue until its purpose is served.

The Administrative Order incorporates within its structure certain elements that exist in the three recognized forms of secular government—democracy, autocracy, and aristocracy—without replicating



any of them:

The hereditary authority which the Guardian is called upon to exercise, the vital and essential functions which the Universal House of Justice discharges, the specific provisions requiring its democratic election by the representatives of the faithful—these combine to demonstrate the truth that this divinely revealed Order, which can never be identified with any of the standard types of government referred to by Aristotle in his works, embodies and blends with the spiritual verities on which it is based the beneficent elements which are to be found in each one of them.<sup>52</sup>

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## Notes:

1. This article describes Bahá'í administration in normative terms, based on authoritative Bahá'í texts.—Ed.
2. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2000 printing) 145.
3. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World, 1950–1957* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971, 1999 printing) 63.
4. See Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 2005 printing) 15: 217–23.
5. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 2004 printing) 323.
6. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 325.
7. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 324.
8. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 324.
9. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, comp. Helen Hornby, 6th ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1999) 593: 181.
10. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 325.
11. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993, 2005 printing) ¶42: 36; n66: 197–98.
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944, 1997 printing) 11.
13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 11.
14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 14.
15. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 19–20.
16. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148.
17. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 150.
18. Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996) 5.1: 14.
19. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922–1932*, 1974 ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1998 printing) 63.
20. Universal House of Justice, *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972) 3–6. Note: The constitution has also been published in volumes 15 to 20 of *The Baha'i*

- World; see, for example, vol. 20: 1986–92 (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1998) 609–17.
21. Universal House of Justice, *Constitution* 8.
  22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 15: 221.
  23. Shoghi Effendi quoted in Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 111.3a: 215.
  24. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 111.14: 217.
  25. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 111.14: 217.
  26. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶30: 30.
  27. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 6.
  28. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 331.
  29. Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 1983–1992* (Riviera Beach, FL, USA: Palabra, 1992) 66–67.
  30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 14.
  31. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 39.
  32. Universal House of Justice, *Constitution* 10–11.
  33. Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, comp. Gertrude Garrida (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973) 136: 50.
  34. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 141.
  35. Universal House of Justice, letter to National Spiritual Assemblies, 30 May 1997, published in Universal House of Justice, *Regional Bahá'í Councils* (Wilmette, IL, USA: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1997) 2.
  36. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 2.5: 9.
  37. Universal House of Justice, *Constitution* 15.
  38. Universal House of Justice, *Constitution* 16.
  39. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 72.3: 150–51, 72.9: 152.
  40. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 72.8: 152.
  41. Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986* 132.3a: 247.
  42. The voting age for Bahá'í elections is twenty-one.
  43. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 88.
  44. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 6: 68.
  45. Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, comp. Universal House of Justice, vol. 1 (Maryborough, VIC: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) 170, 166, 168: 93.
  46. Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, 192: 103.
  47. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Center and Marzieh Gail, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996, 2004 printing) 44.1: 93.
  48. Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) 10.
  49. Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms* 10.
  50. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶181: 84.
  51. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 5.
  52. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 154.

## Other Sources and Related Reading:

- The principal works of Shoghi Effendi in which the Bahá'í administration is defined are *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* and *Bahá'í Administration*. See also *Principles of Bahá'í Administration: A Compilation*, 4th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976); and Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973) 110–11. Other important texts include the constitutions of the Universal House of Justice (*Constitution*) and of the National Spiritual Assembly and the Local Spiritual Assembly, which have been published in various formats; see, for example, "The National Spiritual Assembly" and "The Local Spiritual Assembly" in *The Bahá'í World*, vol. 20: 1986–92 (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1998) 718–24. Works by the Universal House of Justice that illuminate various aspects of Bahá'í administration are *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* and *The Institution of the Counsellors* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2001). Many relevant letters from the Universal House of Justice are published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1986*. See also the Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of the world [on the electoral process], 25 Mar. 2007, Bahá'í Library Online, [http://bahai-library.com/file.php5?file=uhj\\_2007\\_3\\_25&language=All](http://bahai-library.com/file.php5?file=uhj_2007_3_25&language=All) (accessed 13 Feb. 2009).
- Compilations of Bahá'í authoritative texts on Bahá'í administration include: *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File* 1–303: 1–87; *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, 93–110 (Consultation), 315–18 (Elections), 319–66 (Universal House of Justice), 419–58 (Nineteen Day Feast), and 489–550 (Funds and Huqúqu'lláh); *The Compilation of Compilations*, comp. Universal House of Justice, vol. 2 (Maryborough, VIC: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) 29–60 (Local Spiritual Assembly), 83–136 (National Spiritual Assembly); *Compilation of Compilations*, comp. Universal House of Justice, vol. 3 (Ingleside, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2000) 46–59 (Issues Concerning Community Functioning), 60–91 (National Convention), 139–153 (Bahá'í Elections); and *The Continental Boards of Counselors* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981).
- On the history of the Bahá'í administration, see Eunice Braun, *From Strength to Strength: The First Half Century of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Era* (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978). See also Eunice Braun's *The March of the Institutions: A Commentary on the Interdependence of Rulers and Learned* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984) and her *From Vision to Victory: Thirty Years of the Universal House of Justice* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1993); John E. Kolstoe, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985); Roger Coe, "An Organic Order: An Approach to the Philosophy of Bahá'u'lláh through the Writings of Shoghi Effendi," in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Bahá'í Studies Ninth Annual Conference, November 2–4, 1984, Ottawa Canada* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1993) 25–56; Udo Schaefer, "Infallible Institutions?" *Bahá'í Studies Review* 9 (1999/2000): 17–45; June Manning Thomas, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi* (Ottawa: Bahá'í Studies Publications, 1999).

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