

BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

OFFICE OF CORRESPONDENCE

17 February 2022

Transmitted by email: XXX

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Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter of 20 May 2021, inquiring about the permissibility of Spiritual Assemblies establishing term limits for their members, has been received at the Bahá'í World Centre and passed to our Office for reply, the delay in which is regretted.

Enclosed are two extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in response to similar queries about term limits being set for members of Assemblies.

As to the aspect of your question whether a Spiritual Assembly may amend its by-laws in this regard, the following has been provided in response to a related query posed to the House of Justice on a previous occasion:

The principle governing the provisions of local and national Bahá'í constitutions is that they should be uniform throughout the world, except to the degree that the form of incorporation adopted and the laws of the country concerned necessitate modifications. Therefore, any substantial modifications to the standard by-laws should be referred to the House of Justice for approval.

(From a letter dated 30 April 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Office of Correspondence

Enclosure

You suggest that it would be useful to limit the number of years a person may serve on a Spiritual Assembly as a means of ensuring change of membership. Change is indeed healthy for a living organism, as Shoghi Effendi pointed out, but he also said that change merely for the sake of change is unwise. As you attempt to deepen your understanding of the nature of Bahá'í elections, you may wish to reflect upon the following passage from a letter written on behalf of the beloved Guardian:

Regarding your questions concerning the advisability of changing the basis of the National Assembly's election and confining it to the body of delegates or of limiting the term of office: He feels that as any such changes are of a radical nature and should therefore also apply to the National Spiritual Assemblies of other countries they are inadvisable and premature, both for this reason and because of their very nature.

What is needed is to get the Administration in its present form to run more efficiently and at the same time to build up a higher sense of responsibility among the body of the believers. They should be encouraged to think more, not only about the qualifications of members of their elected bodies, but also about such things as you mention, the law of averages, the age and indisposition of some of the members, etc.

In another letter written on his behalf on this same subject, he again emphasized the responsibility that each voting believer holds:

As regards the election of new members on the National Assembly, Shoghi Effendi finds no other practical method, that is in conformity with the spirit of the teachings, except through better acquaintance of the friends during the annual Conventions and summer schools. It is the duty of the individual friends to come to know one another and find out who are the persons best fitted to become members of that body. This is a slow process but surely the best one and gives the greatest amount of freedom of choice to the electors. It is the duty of the friends individually to become more intelligent voters and vote only after studying the situation conscientiously.

While time and maturation of the Cause may, at some point, necessitate changes in the Bahá'í electoral system, one should remember that the current system of Bahá'í elections is not bound by any requirement to re-elect the same membership; it is as free to do so as it is capable of effecting gradual or radical change, depending solely on the voters' perception of prevailing circumstances and conditions and of the needs of the Cause.

(From a letter dated 26 February 2007 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Your desire to see change on the membership of the Local Spiritual Assembly that you serve is warmly acknowledged. Change is a characteristic of a living organism, and when change in the membership of the institutions of the Faith occurs, it can add fresh insights and new energies. The friends are not bound to elect the same membership year after year. However, change merely for the sake of change is unwise, while such change as is expressed through the will of the electors through strict adherence to the Teachings can be of great value. The friends, therefore, should do everything in their power to become knowledgeable and

effective electors. And as the electors prayerfully and conscientiously cast their ballots, they may retain the existing membership, or effect gradual or radical change, depending solely on their perception of a number of considerations, including the qualifications of those eligible to be elected, the prevailing circumstances and conditions, and the needs of the Cause.

Relevant to this issue are the following words of the House of Justice contained in its 25 March 2007 message to the Bahá'ís of the world:

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.

(From a letter dated 4 March 2019 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)