

# Administrative Order

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## THE ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

13 August 2000

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Baha'i Friends,

Recently the Universal House of Justice instructed us to write a response to one of the friends who raised a number of questions in relation to the functioning of the Baha'i Administrative Order. It feels that this response will be of interest to other believers and to National Spiritual Assemblies which may be called upon to answer similar questions.

A copy of this letter is, therefore, enclosed for each National Assembly, together with its attachment. The latter is a copy of a letter written by the House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of New Zealand on 31 May 1988. Although it had been circulated to a number of National Assemblies at the time, the House of Justice feels that it would be helpful for all National Assemblies to receive it now.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

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## ATTACHMENT 1

18 July 2000

Dear Baha'i Friend,

The Universal House of Justice received your letter of 31 May 2000 and has asked us to send you the following reply.

To your question "What do I have to think of the promotion of a Baha'i democratization?" there is both a simple reply and a more complex one, and the House of Justice feels that it is desirable to approach the matter from both points of view.

Firstly, as a Baha'i who has given many decades of outstanding service in your community, you understand that the Baha'i Administrative Order is an integral part of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah; it is a divinely conceived system which, as the Guardian explained in *The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah*, "incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government, without being in any sense a mere replica of any one of them, and without introducing within its machinery any of the objectionable features which they inherently possess. It blends and harmonizes, as no government fashioned by mortal hands has as yet accomplished, the salutary truths which each of these systems undoubtedly contains without vitiating the integrity of those God-given verities on which it is ultimately founded."

It is the continuing task of Baha'is to increase their understanding of the principles on which the Administrative Order is founded, and to improve the

faithfulness with which they implement these principles in their actions. Indeed one of the specific needs of this period in the development of the Faith is the evolution of national and local Baha'i institutions. If, therefore, by "the promotion of a Baha'i democratization" is meant the furthering of an increasingly responsible participation in the work of the community by its individual members, this is highly meritorious, and should be a continual endeavour of Baha'i institutions.

That is the simple answer. However, if the intention is that the Baha'i Administrative Order should be altered to more closely accord with current concepts of political democracy, a more complex series of issues arises. In The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah, Shoghi Effendi lists evidences "of the non-autocratic character of the Baha'i Administrative Order and of its inclination to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs", but this does not justify a proposal to change the system which has been established in the Writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha and in the elucidations of Shoghi Effendi. Such an effort, whether or not described as "the promotion of a Baha'i democratization", would be contrary to the clear teachings of the Faith. Consideration of the various specific questions included in your letter will help to clarify this distinction.

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In the second paragraph of your letter you say that you understand that the Baha'i World Order is "at least 80%, a theocratic-aristocratic order". Inasmuch as the Order of Baha'u'llah is an integral part of the divine Revelation that He, as a Manifestation of God, has given us, one could say that this Order is essentially theocratic, but inasmuch as it is entirely devoid of any kind of clergy or priesthood, it is not at all a "theocracy" in the sense in which the term is generally used and understood.

Similarly, the quality of aristocracy (rule by the best) as it appears in the Faith is in sharp contrast to what is generally understood by this term. Free from electioneering or such external pressures as those coming from economic power or manipulation of the press, the believers seek to elect for membership on their governing institutions those persons whom they regard as best qualified for such office. The elected members are then responsible to God and to their consciences, rather than to those who elect them. You are undoubtedly familiar with Shoghi Effendi's words in Baha'i Administration on the attitude and responsibility of members of Assemblies:

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour, by their open-mindedness,

their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause. As already noted above, the way in which believers become members of the elected institutions is democratic. It is, indeed, far more democratic than the methods by which the members of most parliaments are elected. The Baha'i electoral system is entirely free from the power and bargaining of parties and factions, and from the manipulations of vested interests. Each voter is free to cast his or her ballot for whomever he or she chooses.

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Even in the best democracies nowadays the driving incentive in elections is the wish of each politician to obtain power so as to be able to carry out the programme that he particularly favours--an election becomes a competition which the self-promoting candidates either "win" or "lose". The electorate is treated as a mass to be swayed, by rhetoric and various forms of inducement, to support one or other candidate. In the Baha'i system, however, the voters are the active force and the motive which impels them is to choose those individuals who are best suited to serve on the institution. The persons elected are passive in the electoral process (except in their role as voters) and accept election as an obligation to serve the community in response to the wish of the electorate. In other words, the systems differ in their essential spirit: one is a seeking for power, the other is an acceptance of responsibility for service.

You mention several things which you describe as the most significant democratic principles and values. Among them are transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue. Here too, just as the spirit underlying the Baha'i system differs from that impelling most current democratic systems, so do the methods of implementing these principles and the attitude of those involved.

In general one can say that modern democracies have been established as the outcome of attempts to limit the power of absolute monarchy, of dictatorships, or of certain dominant classes. This may have come about gradually through the centuries, or tumultuously by a series of revolutions. Thus, even when

democratic constitutions and structures have been established, there remains a suspicion of authority as such, and a tension between the degree of freedom accorded to individual citizens and the imposition of sufficient public discipline to protect the weak against the selfish pursuits of the strong among the citizenry. The operation of transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue is thus imbued with a spirit of partisanship that easily descends into the merciless invasion of personal privacy, the dissemination of calumny, the exaggeration of mistrust, and the misuse of the news media at the hands of vested interests. The reaction of those who attempt to protect themselves against such distortions of the system produces secretiveness, concealment of uncomfortable facts, and reciprocal misuse of the media--in all, a perpetuation of disharmony in the social fabric.

In contrast to these patterns bred by traditional antagonisms, the Baha'i system is based upon the ideals of unity, harmony, justice, diversity and forbearance in the building of a divinely conceived administrative structure through a process of mutual learning and discovery. As already noted, the element of power-seeking is entirely absent. All members of a Baha'i community, no matter what position they may temporarily occupy in the administrative structure, are expected to regard themselves as involved in a learning process, as they strive to understand and implement the laws and principles of the Faith. As part of this process, the Assemblies are encouraged to continually share their hopes and cares and the news of developments with the members of the community and to seek their views and support. There are, of course, matters such as the personal problems of a believer which he (or she) brings to his Assembly for advice, the amounts of the contributions of individual believers to the Fund, and so forth, in relation to which the Assembly must observe strict confidentiality. As in any just system of government the proper balance has to be sought and found between extremes. In this connection, you will recall Shoghi Effendi's statement in Baha'i Administration:

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Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Baha'i can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other.

Wherever one finds malfunctioning in a Baha'i community, it can be traced to a failure to follow properly the laws, principles and methods laid down in the Writings. The overcoming of such shortcomings is part of the learning process in which all Baha'is are involved. The continual aim of the institutions of the Baha'i community--whether it be through the operation of summer schools and training institutes, through the development of the Nineteen Day Feasts and National Conventions, or through day-to-day interaction among the friends--is to empower the individual believers so that they will learn how to live their lives with increasing knowledge, wisdom, unity and fruitfulness in conformity

with the Teachings of Baha'u'llah.

Further, in addition to the Spiritual Assemblies, the Baha'i Administrative Order also contains the institutions of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards. Their endeavours, with the individuals, the community and the institutions, are intended to help maintain the true spirit of the Faith, to counsel the governing institutions and to assist them to attain the high ideals set before them by Baha'u'llah and the Master. As the House of Justice wrote in a letter dated 24 April 1972: "The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, 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 Baha'i administration unparalleled in the religions of the past." The House of Justice went on to comment that, only as the Baha'i community grows, and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from past ages, will the vital interdependence of these two arms of the administration be properly understood and the value of their interaction be fully recognized. Two other issues raised by you also deserve attention. Direct election of the main institutions of a society can hardly be regarded as a significant democratic principle. In the United States of America, for example, the president is elected by an electoral college of individuals chosen in state elections. In some other countries the president is elected by the parliament, not by the people. However, whether direct election is a democratic principle or not, it cannot be applied in the Baha'i Faith because it is stated in the Sacred Writings that the Universal House of Justice must be elected in a three-stage election and National Spiritual Assemblies must be the outcome of a two-stage election.

Finally, there is the question of the membership of the Universal House of Justice being restricted to men. This, likewise, is a provision of the Sacred Writings, as stated clearly by both 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian. It should be viewed in the light of the principle mentioned above, that election to institutions of Baha'i administration is regarded as a summons to service and not as an accession to power. It is also significant that the Universal House of Justice has itself written that the fact that its membership is restricted to men cannot be used as an indication that men excel women or that the Baha'i principle of the equality of the sexes is not valid. As you know, it is a mandate of the Universal House of Justice to ensure the

--The Administrative Order, 7-18-2000, Page 5

establishment of the equality of men and women, and you are undoubtedly aware of the vigour with which the Baha'is are putting this into effect. This matter was discussed at some length in a letter written on 31 May 1988 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of New Zealand, a copy of which is enclosed for your information.

The House of Justice hopes that these comments will help you to resolve the confusion which you indicate is troubling you.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

For Department of the Secretariat  
Enclosure

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ATTACHMENT 2

31 May 1988

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of New Zealand

Dear Baha'i Friends,

We have been informed of a paper presented at a recent New Zealand Baha'i Studies conference, which raises the possibility that the ineligibility of women for membership on the Universal House of Justice may be a temporary provision subject to change through a process of progressive unfoldment of the divine purpose. We present the following points as a means of increasing the friends' understanding of this established provision of the Order of Baha'u'llah that membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men.

The system of Baha'i Administration is "indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith" as set forth in the Writings of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha. A unique feature of this system is the appointment of authorized interpreters, in the persons of 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian, to provide authoritative statements on the intent of Baha'u'llah's Revelation. Writing in "The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah", Shoghi Effendi stated that 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian "share ... the right and obligation to interpret the Baha'i teachings". In relation to his own function as interpreter, he further stated that "the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Baha'u'llah and of 'Abdu'l-Baha". The significance of this important provision is that the religion of God is safeguarded and protected against schism and its essential unity is preserved.

The function of the divinely appointed interpreters is evident in the progressive disclosure and clarification of the details of the Baha'i teachings concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice. Baha'u'llah in His Writings ordained both the Universal House of Justice and Local Houses of Justice. However, in many of His laws He refers simply to "the House of Justice" and its members as "Men of Justice", leaving open for later clarification to which level or levels of the whole institution each law would apply. 'Abdu'l-Baha, the Centre of Baha'u'llah's Covenant and the unerring Interpreter of His Word, not only provided for the establishment of National Spiritual Assemblies, to be designated at some future time as Secondary Houses of Justice, but He also outlined the means by which the Universal House of Justice was to be elected. In His Will and Testament the Master wrote: And now, concerning the House of Justice which God hath ordained as the source of all good and freed from all error, it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers.... By this House is meant the Universal House of Justice, that is, in all countries a secondary House of Justice must be instituted, and these secondary Houses of Justice must elect the members of the

Universal one.... (p. 14)

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And in one of His Tablets He had already written:

At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.

In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Baha referred to membership of the "House of Justice" being restricted to men, without a specific designation of the level or levels of the institution to which this provision applied:

The House of Justice, however, according to the explicit text of the Law of God, is confined to men; this for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon. ("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha" [rev. ed.], (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1982), p. 80)

Later the Master clarified that it was only the Universal House of Justice whose membership was confined to men. 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

According to the ordinances of the Faith of God, women are the equals of men in all rights save only that of membership on the Universal House of Justice, for as hath been stated in the text of the Book, both the head and the members of the House of Justice are men. However, in all other bodies, such as the Temple Construction Committee, the Teaching Committee, the Spiritual Assembly, and in charitable and scientific associations, women share equally in all rights with men. (from a newly-translated Tablet)

Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, provided the following authoritative elaboration of this theme:

As regards your question concerning the membership of the Universal House of Justice: there is a Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Baha in which He definitely states that the membership of the Universal House is confined to men, and that the wisdom of it will be fully revealed and appreciated in the future. In the local as well as the National Houses of Justice, however, women have the full right of membership. It is, therefore, only to the International House that they cannot be elected.... (28 July 1936)

'Abdu'l-Baha Himself, it should also be noted, had, as attested by the above-cited extracts from His Tablets, affirmed that the ineligibility of women for election to the Universal House of Justice had been set out "in the text of the Book" and "in the explicit text of the Law of God". In other words, this provision was established by none other than Baha'u'llah Himself.

Further, in response to a number of questions about eligibility for membership and procedures for election of the Universal House of Justice, the Guardian's secretary writing on his behalf distinguished between those questions which could be answered by reference to the "explicitly revealed" Text and those which could not. Membership of the Universal House of Justice fits into the former category. The letter stated:

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The membership of the Universal House of Justice is confined to men. Fixing the

number of the members, the procedures for election and the term of membership will be known later, as these are not explicitly revealed in the Holy Text. (27 May 1940)

Hence, 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian progressively have revealed, in accordance with divine inspiration, the meaning and implications of Baha'u'llah's seminal teachings. Their interpretations are fundamental statements of truth which cannot be varied through legislation by the Universal House of Justice.

The progressive clarification of the details of the laws concerning membership of the Houses of Justice has been accompanied by a gradual implementation of their provisions. For example, based on the Texts available to the believers at the time, membership of Local Houses of Justice was initially confined to men. When the Master began to elaborate on the differences between the levels of this Institution He clarified that the exclusion of women applied only to the Universal House of Justice. Thereafter, women became eligible for service as members of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. Women in the West, who already enjoyed the benefits of education and opportunities for social involvement, participated in this form of service much sooner than, for instance, their Baha'i sisters in Iran, who were accorded this right only in 1954, "removing thereby the last remaining obstacle to the enjoyment of complete equality of rights in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Persian Baha'i Community". It is important to note that the timing of the introduction of the provisions called for by the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian in relation to the Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, rather than constituting a response to some external condition or pressure, was dictated by the principle of progressive implementation of the laws, as enjoined by Baha'u'llah Himself. Concerning the implementation of the laws, Baha'u'llah wrote in one of His Tablets:

Indeed the laws of God are like unto the ocean and the children of men as fish, did they but know it. However, in observing them one must exercise tact and wisdom.... One must guide mankind to the ocean of true understanding in a spirit of love and tolerance.

As mentioned earlier, the law regarding the membership of the Universal House of Justice is embedded in the Text and has been merely restated by the divinely appointed interpreters. It is therefore neither amenable to change nor subject to speculation about some possible future condition.

With regard to the status of women, the important point for Baha'is to remember is that in face of the categorical pronouncements in Baha'i Scripture establishing the equality of men and women, the ineligibility of women for membership of the Universal House of Justice does not constitute evidence of the superiority of men over women. It must also be borne in mind that women are not excluded from any other international institution of the Faith. They are found among the ranks of the Hands of the Cause. They serve as members of the International Teaching Centre and as Continental Counsellors. And, there is nothing in the Text to preclude the participation of women in such future international bodies as the Supreme Tribunal.

Though at the present time it may be difficult for the believers to appreciate the reason for the circumscription of membership on the Universal House of

Justice to men, we call upon the friends to remain assured by the Master's promise that clarity of understanding will be achieved in due course. The friends, both women and men, must accept this with faith that the Covenant of Baha'u'llah will

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aid them and the institutions of His World Order to see the realization of every principle ordained by His unerring Pen, including the equality of men and women, as expounded in the Writings of the Cause.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

— Administrative Order