

mandated with stimulating and supporting the efforts of the community, facilitating its healthy development, and ensuring the flow of insights and experience from the international level to the grassroots. Bahá'u'lláh appointed four distinguished believers as Hands of the Cause of God. The appointment of individuals as Hands of the Cause continued through the lifetime of Shoghi-Effendi and came to a close with his passing. Today, the appointed arm of the Bahá'í administrative order comprises the International Teaching Centre, the Continental Boards of Counsellors, and Auxiliary Board members and their assistants.

THE SERIES OF GLOBAL PLANS

The Bahá'í administrative system as a whole evolved to enable institutions to support and cultivate learning and to allow for new insights and experience at the grassroots to appropriately be shared for the benefit of other communities. As the institute process gained in strength in various parts of the world, it began to give rise to “a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment,” wrote the House of Justice. Speaking of this emerging culture, the House of Justice continued, “And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.”³ Where such dynamics were present, Bahá'í institutions had the opportunity to learn how to more effectively nurture human potential. Terms such as “facilitate,” “accompany,” “support,” “encourage,” “empower,” and “channel” came to define the work of the administration of the Faith at the grassroots.

The “dynamics of an irrepressible movement” became more pronounced in small settings, such as villages, neighborhoods, and small pockets within them. A concentration of activities in a relatively small geographic area could have a pronounced impact on the attitudes, orientation, and daily activities of a village or neighborhood. This, combined with the participation of inhabitants in the institute process, fueled a process of individual and collective transformation, manifesting in various ways—for example, greater unity, trust, and consideration in a community; a decrease in crime rates and drug abuse; a far greater weight being given to the education of girls as well as their participation in collective decision-making; and the amelioration of tensions between previously opposing groups.

What occurred in all such settings was the shifting of decision-making processes closer to the ground, where activities were occurring among groups of families and small nuclei of friends. A remarkable pattern of spiritual empowerment and social change began to emerge. Such developments, most notably the progressive decentralization of decision-making to enable the participation of people in greater numbers in the spiritual development of their communities, point to the ability of the administrative order to adapt to changing circumstances and to evolve in response to the exigencies of growth. To further stimulate and coordinate grassroots activity, the Universal House of Justice

formalized a new institution in 1997 at the regional level: Regional Bahá'í Councils. By 2021, the number of Regional Councils had grown to 228 in no fewer than 60 national communities. Regional Councils followed the advancement of clusters within their jurisdiction, and supported their further development.

In growing, vibrant local communities, the institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly was able to mature further and evolve. In towns and villages where the number of those participating constituted a substantial percentage of a population, Local Assemblies assumed a more prominent role, not only within the Bahá'í community, but also in the wider society. They began to deliberate on the well-being of the entire local population and came to be seen as a source of moral insight.

The influence of the transformation occurring worldwide at all levels of the community and the development of its administrative affairs had implications for the Faith's international institutions. At the Bahá'í World Centre, the historic formation in 2005 of the International Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh, with branches spread throughout the globe, marked the further development of an institution that was created by Bahá'u'lláh to foster the prosperity of humankind. Several other entities were created to support various major aspects of the work of the Faith, including the Office of Temples and Sites in 2011, the Office of Public Discourse in 2012, and the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems in 2014. Additionally, after several decades of experience following efforts in social and economic development, the House of Justice established in 2018 a new world-embracing institution: the Bahá'í International Development Organization.

Internationally, the number of Continental Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members increased from 81 in 1995 to 90 in 2020 and from 990 in 1995 to 1,134 in 2016, respectively.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PATH TRAVERSED

The Bahá'í administrative order is shaped by a consciousness of the inherent oneness of humankind. This nascent system provides humanity with a new model of governance characterized primarily by reciprocity and cooperation, unity and concord, and trustworthiness and forbearance. It recasts the nature of the relationships among individuals, institutions, and the community.

The experience of recent years offers the first glimmerings of a new dynamic among these three protagonists—for example, of the kind of individual who exercises self-expression responsibly through thoughtful participation in consultation devoted to the common good; of institutions which, appreciating the need for coordinated action channeled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control, but to nurture and guide; and of communities that work to sustain an environment of unity and mutual support, where the powers of the individual under the guidance of institutions are harmonized into a powerful collective movement. A new warmth and a new life have come to characterize the relationships among the individual, the institutions, and the community, and a profound, transformative power existing in the teachings of

Bahá'-'u'--lláh is expressed in fuller measure.

From the grassroots to the international level, then, relationships among these three protagonists in the life of the Bahá'í community are being recast, in stark contrast to those that predominate in many societies, where, too often, the citizen clamors for freedom, the body politic claims precedence, and institutions demand submission, locking all three actors in an ultimately futile struggle for power.

Almost a century and a half ago—against a backdrop of feuding monarchs, far-reaching empires, and gathering storms of political and social change—Bahá'u'lláh declared that humanity was approaching its collective maturity, which would usher in an era of lasting peace. However, the patterns of governance and ingrained relationships among the peoples and nations of His time were not capable of achieving such a vision. “The winds of despair,” He wrote, “are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective.”⁴

The Bahá'í administrative order—an expression of the “wondrous System” designed by Bahá'u'lláh—though relatively nascent, is demonstrating its capacity to channel the energies of millions of individuals into the weaving of a new social fabric.

Notes:

1. Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, Ridván 2010, <https://www.bahai.org/r/878839251>
2. The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, <https://www.bahai.org/r/264008982>
3. Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, Ridván 2010, <https://www.bahai.org/r/432258610>
4. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, <https://www.bahai.org/r/041830557>

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