

**Just System of Government:  
The Third Dimension to World Peace**  
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## Introduction

The Bahá'í approach to government or collective action is a vast subject that cannot be adequately dealt with in a short paper. Accordingly, this brief presentation will be confined to a few highlights, which might be of special interest in the context of the general discussion this weekend. There are at least three dimensions to the Bahá'í plan for the establishment of a permanent world peace based on justice, or in Bahá'í terminology, "The Most Great Peace." The first dimension is the creation of a new race of men: the adoption of the highest ethical standards by every man, woman, and child on the planet. It is irrational to suppose that a just society can be achieved unless the people of that society are themselves just individuals.

A second dimension to the Bahá'í plan are broad policies to ensure that every person in the world has equal opportunity and encouragement to develop fully his or her physical, mental, and spiritual potential. One important aspect of this issue is the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty within nations and between nations. Another is the elimination of racist and other prejudices that crush the human spirit.

A third dimension of the plan is a new system of government based on spiritual values and a world perspective. It must be clear by now to every thinking person that the present political system corrupts even the noblest of people and is not capable of dealing with the major issues that face humanity today. The most important characteristic of the present political scene is its division into some 170 sovereign states, the so-called Westphalian system.<sup>1</sup> Many of these states have authoritarian governments that exploit and oppress rather than serve their peoples. Even more appalling is the fact that the system is so out of step with the needs of the time that it risks the destruction of most, if not all, of mankind for causes, which, by comparison and in the perspective of history, can only be called frivolous. Establishment of a permanent peace based on justice is, in the Bahá'í view, only possible if we move to an entirely new system of government.

The Bahá'í Community has already established a new system of government to direct its own affairs. This system, known as the Bahá'í Administrative

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1. After the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which is credited with formally recognizing that there is no superior authority to the territorial ruler. (See, for instance, Lynn H. Miller, *Global Order* [Westview Press, 1985].)

Order,<sup>2</sup> is offered to mankind as an alternative model to conventional methods. Ultimately, it is envisaged that this model will evolve into a full-fledged system featuring a world legislature, a world executive backed by a world police force, and a world judiciary, with subsidiary branches at national and local levels in every part of the world. Meanwhile, Bahá'ís are acquiring, within their own communities, experience on how to work their radically different system of managing the collective affairs of society. I propose to discuss the Bahá'í Administrative Order in two parts: first by briefly recapitulating its main features, and second by suggesting some aspects that make it uniquely fitted for the needs of the day. There are three

key elements in the Bahá'í approach to government: a world structure; an electoral system, which puts emphasis on spiritual and collective qualities rather than on individual self-interest; and full, objective consultation as the basis for decision making.

### **Three Principal Elements of the Bahá'í Administrative Order**

#### **Structure**

The administrative structure has two parts: an elected wing responsible for running the affairs of the community, and an appointed wing responsible for monitoring the community's spiritual health. The elected wing is a three-tier structure with local spiritual assemblies to manage the affairs of local communities, national spiritual assemblies to coordinate the affairs of each cultural or national grouping of communities, and finally a Universal House of Justice to give guidance and direction to the whole world community. The other wing of the structure consists of Continental Boards of Counsellors, appointed by the Universal House of Justice, which in turn appoint subsidiary bodies at regional and local levels. Members of these boards are carefully chosen for their spiritual qualities, abilities, and loyalty to the Faith. Their role is to observe and to advise the elected wing but not to intervene directly in community affairs.

#### **Elections**

The electoral system has both direct and indirect elements. The Local Spiritual Assembly is elected annually at a local convention by direct secret ballot of all adult members of the community. The National Spiritual Assembly is elected annually at a national convention consisting of delegates elected on a regional basis by the national community. The Universal House of Justice is elected every five years by an International Convention composed of the members of all the national spiritual assemblies. Each body has nine members, and to be valid, each ballot cast must list nine names. All members of the local, national, or world community, as the case may be, who are in good standing are eligible for election, except for members of the boards of counsellors and

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2. The Administrative Order is only one aspect of a Bahá'í program to promote the "Lesser Peace," an interim stage on the way to "The Most Great Peace." Other aspects of that program include the community's development of personal standards of ethics, which will attract others giving service, e.g., economic and social development projects; support for the United Nations, and the recent peace statement addressed to the peoples of the world by the Universal House of Justice.

their auxiliary boards, and in the case of the Universal House of Justice, women.<sup>3</sup> All qualified adults have a sacred duty to vote unless there is a special circumstance as happens for instance when a move into a new community makes it impossible to have an informed view. To preclude divisiveness, nominations, forming of parties, and campaigning are all strictly forbidden practices.

#### **Consultation**

At all levels of the Bahá'í administrative structure, comprehensive consultation is practiced with a view to increasing the probability of arriving at the best decision. The first principle of Bahá'í consultation is universal participation so as to benefit from the widest range of experience and wisdom. It is the responsibility of all members of the body involved, not just the chairperson, to see that everyone present has an equal opportunity to contribute. Everyone is encouraged to speak frankly, though with calmness and courtesy.

The second principle is detachment and objectivity. The discussion should follow a logical sequence: prayer to set the tone and perspective, and then the normal steps of scientific enquiry: determining the exact nature of the problem, ascertaining the relevant facts, agreeing on the spiritual or administrative principles involved, a full and frank discussion, the offering and voting on a resolution, and finally action to put the resolution into effect. All should feel that the ideas put forward belong to the community, and not to the person who first presented them; indeed, a participant may well speak against his original suggestion if he subsequently hears a superior suggestion.

The third principle is the need for unity in carrying out a decision. Decisions can be made by majority vote, but Bahá'ís are encouraged to strive for one approved unanimously. If a decision is by majority vote, a person in the minority should nevertheless wholeheartedly support the implementation of the decision and should not campaign to stop it, as this would only cause dissension and undermine the unity of the community, which is held to be far more essential than avoiding a possible short-term mistake. If proper consultation procedures have been followed, the chance that a mistake has been made should be low. In any case, such mistakes can always be reversed if further consultation is brought about as a result of proper appeal procedures, first through the body that made the decision and then, if that fails to bring satisfaction, through higher bodies.

## **Comparison with the Conventional Political System**

### **Structure**

I should now like to comment on each of the three main elements of the Bahá'í administrative order: the structure, the electoral system, and consultation, with stress on those aspects that seem particularly important in the context of the needs of the time. Perhaps the most important feature of the structure of the Administrative Order is that it is unified on a world scale. There is a single supreme world body, the Universal House of Justice, responsible for policy

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that the reason for this rule concerning the Universal House of Justice would become apparent in the future.

direction and coordination of the affairs of the whole community. This model structure contrasts sharply with that of conventional politics, which is divided into some 170 independent nations in frequent conflict with one another.

A second important feature of the structure is that the short-term, day-to-day administration of the community is undertaken in the perspective of long-term principles and policies for the welfare of all mankind, which are laid down in the writings of the central figures of the Faith and which are the ultimate source of authority for all the institutions of the Bahá'í administrative order. The long-term perspective is quite different from that which prevails in conventional politics, where to our immense cost nearly all concern is centered on short-term material gains for sectarian interests.

A third feature worthy of note is that, though the Administrative Order is unified at a world level, it is essentially a highly decentralized system with most of the day-to-day affairs of the community being handled at the local level where the decision makers are in constant communion with the other members of the community. Conversely, it is typical of the political system that the majority of important decisions are highly centralized at the national level, and there is little real contact with ordinary people.

A fourth feature is that the structure is simple and can therefore be put into practice in every type of society, from the most complex and sophisticated to those where the majority is illiterate--a fact already

demonstrated in many places. There is a contrast here again between the successful experience of the Bahá'í community building up from the grass roots level, and for instance, the attempt in recent decades by Western democracies to impose from above their complex parliamentary systems on societies that have quite different traditions of government.

A final feature of the structure, which should be noted, is that the Continental Boards of Counsellors and their assistants, who form the second wing of the administrative order, keep a close watch on the spiritual well-being of all aspects of the community. This function is a vital protection for any society and illustrates the fact that the Bahá'í approach has realism as well as idealism in that it recognizes that the highest standards will take time to achieve. In conventional politics such appointed guardians of the public good can degenerate into bullying commissars. This has not happened in the Bahá'í community because the counsellors are chosen for their spiritual maturity as well as their other abilities, because their role is purely advisory, and because they are excluded from office in the elective wing of the order and thus have no self-interest to promote.

## Elections

Perhaps the most important feature of the electoral system is that it does not permit the rise of individual leaders, who throughout history have caused great harm to society because of "hubris" and conflict between selfish individual interest and the welfare of society as a whole. Society has always been in great danger from kings, dictators, priests, and even powerful politicians in democracies. Some of the features of the Bahá'í Administrative Order that preclude the emergence of individual leaders are (i) the ban on nominations and campaigning for elections; (ii) the indirect election for the two higher echelons of the administrative structure, which makes widespread publicity about

individuals much less necessary than would be the case for direct elections;<sup>4</sup> (iii) the teaching that electors should vote for those who have spiritual qualities (such as humility and self-effacement) as well as administrative skills and a record of service; (iv) the fact that decisions taken by elected assemblies are confidential with regard to the voting of individual members; and finally (v) the fact that members of elected assemblies only have special status in the community when functioning as an assembly and not when speaking as individuals. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the chairperson of a spiritual assembly is mainly a coordinator and does not use his or her position to gain more influence in a discussion than other members of an assembly. In the case of the Universal House of Justice, the chairman is changed frequently, and his name is not made known to the world at large, so as to avoid the possibility of anyone being construed as "president" of the Bahá'í world.

A second important aspect of the electoral system is that it encourages diversity of background in those who are elected to governing bodies. The requirement that each elector vote for nine names focusses attention on the individual elector's responsibility for the make up of the total assembly rather than on selecting a few individuals, and this focus is inevitably affected by the Bahá'í teachings on unity and diversity: the greater the diversity, the greater the richness of the community, just as a garden with a multitude of different flowers has greater beauty than one with flowers of just one type or color. A good example of such diversity was the 1985 National Spiritual Assembly of the United States which had, in terms of race, four blacks, two whites, one Asian, one Native American, and one Persian; and in terms of sex, four women and five men. They come from a diversity of regions and occupational backgrounds. This result, which is perhaps unique for an elected body in the United States, was achieved without any sort of quota system. The tendency to diversify is strengthened by the directive that in the event of a tied vote, "priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority."

Finally, it might be observed that the voting system has the potential for eliminating that age-old problem of what is the correct balance between continuity and change in government, i.e., how to adapt to changing conditions without the turmoil and inefficiency of sudden breaks in continuity. Predemocratic

systems always had the great risk of misrule when an individual or group held power for a long period of time and then of violent conflict when the ruler died or the regime became intolerable. Present-day democracies frequently do not achieve the right balance either and suffer when there are long periods of dominance by one political party, or when there is a complete change in government personnel following a major shift in power. Government by assembly, frequent elections, and the absence of subgroupings are all features of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, which tend to create situations in which continued membership of the governing body is balanced by new membership.

## Consultation

The Bahá'í system of consultation has several features of immense importance for effective government. First, it encourages consideration, before a

4. Put another way, rational election of the higher echelons would almost certainly not be possible if there were to be both direct suffrage and a ban on campaigning.

decision is made, of a wide range of options including those that are based on the experiences and view of those who in conventional society are rarely heard: the poor, minorities, women, the uneducated. Only too often, as many of us have witnessed personally, such breadth of discussion acts as a healthy corrective to the views of the forceful, the rich, and the educated who are sometimes too self-absorbed and not rooted in the hard realities of life. It is sometimes argued that government by a strong dictator is more efficient than democratic government. In the short run, it is true that one man may be able to decide on a course of action more quickly than a group, but in the longer run it is the depth of consultation on the Bahá'í model that is likely to lead to the most efficient results.<sup>5</sup> It might be noted in this context that an assembly of nine (which is the present Bahá'í practice) is close to the optimal size for efficiency because it is large enough to allow for a wide spectrum of opinion and small enough to allow all members to give their view in a relatively short period of time.

A second important feature of Bahá'í consultation is that it involves constant contact between the ruling bodies and the wider community, particularly at the local level where the community meets together on a regular basis at the Nineteen-Day Feast, at which time the assembly members hear the ideas and views of the other members of the community. The Feast is also a time when the assembly reports on its activities and plans, and thus in effect makes itself accountable on a regular basis.

Of course, a perfect working model cannot be created overnight, and Bahá'í administration is still only at the beginning of its evolution. It takes time for Bahá'ís to shed all of their "old world" habits and ways of thinking, and there is no doubt that there are many consultations that do not follow the ideal model. On the one hand, in cultures where ordinary people have been traditionally told what to do by others, it is not easy for them to change their ways and start taking responsibility, through the assembly, for their own community affairs. In addition, there are some countries where the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly does not change for years at a time except when there is death or emigration, and as a result fresh ideas tend to wither in the face of exhaustion and lack of new experience. On the other hand, most of us who have been in the Bahá'í community even a few years, soon become aware from personal experience just how much quiet progress is being made and how the administrative system ultimately brings out the best in the individual and vice versa, in what might be called a progressive spiral. One of the most tangible signs of such progress has been the increasingly active role of women on local and national spiritual assemblies in countries where women have traditionally had a subservient role in public affairs--a development that has been reported to the United Nations in connection with the International Women's Decade.

## Summary

To summarize, the Bahá'í Administrative Order has a series of features that would be essential in a government system charged with maintaining a lasting

5. Thus, in an experiment carried out at Harvard University in the 1960s, it was observed that a group of non-Bahá'í students trained in the rudiments of Bahá'í consultation performed significantly better than other groups working on the same problem.

world peace. First, it focusses attention on the long-term spiritual and material interests of all the peoples of the world (with particular attention to the interests of the weak and poor), rather than the short-term material interests of powerful sectarian groups, which is the normal goal of conventional politics.

Second, by putting authority in the hands of assemblies, democratically elected in accordance with spiritual principles, it removes the threat of individual leadership, which since the beginning of civilization has brought corruption and placement of individual interest before that of the community supposedly being served.

Third, the principles of consultation and decentralization ensure that the government is continually in dialogue with the whole community, and thus makes decisions on the basis of the widest range of experience and knowledge. Its whole character is one of organic unity with society and, indeed, with the pulse of creation. If the Hegelian model were to be applied to the situation, it might be argued that the thesis is the traditional autocratic form of government with legitimacy flowing from the ruler (God's annointed) down to those who are ruled; that the antithesis is democracy in which legitimacy flows upwards from the people to their rulers; and that the synthesis is the Bahá'í Administrative Order, in which there is a combination of both spiritual authority coming from God, through the teachings of his Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh, to the Universal House of Justice; and a highly democratic process of collective responsibility and universal participation in election and consultation, which closely unites institutions with the community they serve.