THE BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

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Fundamental to the growth, development, and unity of the Bahá'í Faith is its Administrative Order. This chapter begins with an overview of the Administrative Order followed by an outline of the various institutions of which it is comprised and some of their duties. It then considers the nature of the relationships among these institutions, the individual, and the community, and the approach to power and authority that distinguishes Bahá'í administration from other forms of governance. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the essential features of institutional functioning that make this approach to power and authority possible. These features include a unique electoral process, consultation as a mode of decision-making, the emphasis the institutions place on collaboration, and the disposition and qualities of those elected and appointed.

Overview of the Administrative Order

The chapter 'The Universal House of Justice' (Smith) provides a summary of the Covenant that Bahá'u'lláh established with His followers to ensure the ongoing unity of the Bahá'í Faith. In this Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor and the authoritative interpreter of His writings. He also revealed the essential features of a system of institutions, referred to as the Administrative Order, that would administer the affairs of the Bahá'í community. Supreme among these institutions is the Universal House of Justice, which Bahá'u'lláh ordained as the governing body of this system.

In His Will and Testament—the charter for the development of the Administrative Order—'Abdu'l-Bahá further illuminated certain elements of this system as well as many of the principles that would shape its functioning and guide its evolution. In this same document, He appointed Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian of the Faith, who, subsequently, stimulated and guided the multiplication and evolution of the local and national institutions—presently referred to as Local Spiritual Assemblies and National Spiritual Assemblies (see next section)—established by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, respectively. In so doing, Shoghi Effendi laid the foundation for the election of the Universal House of Justice. In 1963, five-and-a-half years after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice was elected for the first time by National Spiritual Assembly members from around the world at the inaugural International Bahá'í Convention. The House of Justice, which has since been elected every five years at this convention, now governs the affairs of the Bahá'ís, and is directly responsible for guiding the work of the institutions of the Administrative Order.

Among these institutions are the aforementioned Spiritual Assemblies—elected bodies that administer the affairs of their communities, and that exercise legislative, executive, and judicial authority at the local and national levels. The Administrative Order also consists of appointed institutions, which currently consist of the Institution of the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, called Auxiliary Board members, who in turn have assistants who help them with their work. The members of these appointed institutions are similarly guided by the Universal House of Justice, but they also receive regular direction from the International Teaching Centre, a corporate body which is appointed by the Universal House of Justice every five years soon after the International Convention, and which is directly responsible to the House of Justice.

The members of these appointed institutions possess no judicial, executive, or legislative authority. However, they are responsible for advising Spiritual Assemblies as well as for encouraging and promoting individual and collective learning and action within the context of the global plans conceived and overseen by the House of Justice in view of the experience and knowledge generated by the community-building processes carried out throughout the world (see the chapters 'A Culture of Learning' [Karlberg and Smith] and 'The Writings of the Universal House of Justice' [Smith]). As discussed in the next section, together with the elected institutions, the Counsellors and their auxiliaries also foster the spiritual, intellectual, and social development of the community, ensuring the continuous propagation and protection of the Faith from the grassroots to the continental levels.

In its message of 30 May 1997, the House of Justice draws attention to the evolutionary nature of the Administrative Order. It states:

> The institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh, rooted in the provisions of His Revelation, have emerged gradually and organically, as the Bahá'í community has grown through the power of the divine impulse imparted to humankind in this age. The characteristics and functions of each of these institutions have evolved, and are still evolving, as are the relationships between them.
>
> (1997)

The House of Justice also explains that, '[e]ven as a living organism,' Bahá'í administration 'has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice' (2010a). Its future role as a system of governance is in fact considered to be unprecedented by Bahá'ís. While highlighting its distinction from 'anything that any Prophet has previously established' and from 'any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions', Shoghi Effendi (1934) affirms that the Administrative Order will,

> as its component parts, its organic institutions, begin to function with efficiency and vigor, assert its claim and demonstrate its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order destined to embrace in the fullness of time the whole of mankind.

With this vision in mind, it is helpful to review some of the responsibilities that each of the institutions is learning to fulfil, as well as to briefly consider how the institutional structures have evolved to accommodate the increasing complexities associated with the development of the Faith, especially since 1963 when the Universal House of Justice was first elected.

The institutions of the Bahá'í Faith and their responsibilities

As outlined in the previous section, the Administrative Order consists of a number of elected and appointed institutions. Supreme among these is the Universal House of Justice, which is discussed in two chapters on the subject in this volume: 'The Universal House of Justice' (Smith) and 'The Writings of the Universal House of Justice' (Smith). Other institutions currently include the following.

The Local Spiritual Assembly

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which is the Bahá'í Faith's most holy book and its book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh states: 'The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counselors to the number of Bahá, and should it exceed this number it doth not matter'. The statement refers to 'House of Justice', which is the permanent name of this institution. It is now temporarily called a 'Local Spiritual Assembly' owing to the stage of development of the Faith at this time. As the community and Assembly members mature in their capacity to carry out the provisions of the Faith, and as the Faith becomes more fully recognized, this institution will eventually assume its rightful title. As Shoghi Effendi explains:

> For reasons which are not difficult to discover, it has been found advisable to bestow upon the elected representatives of Bahá'í communities throughout the world the temporary appellation of Spiritual Assemblies, a term which, as the position and aims of

> the Bahá'í Faith are better understood and more fully recognized, will gradually be superseded by the permanent and more appropriate designation of House of Justice. (1929)

The statement also refers to 'the number of Bahá', by which is meant the number nine. Thus, Local Spiritual Assemblies currently consist of nine members who are elected annually by their respective local communities. In the future, the membership of these institutions may grow in number as determined by the Universal House of Justice. Their term of service may also expand to more than one year.

The first Local Spiritual Assemblies were formed in Iran in the 1890s and early 1900s, and in the United States in the early 1900s—though they were called by various names at the time, and the number of members, the time of election, and the term of membership for each Assembly varied from place to place. During the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, these institutions sprang up all across the globe owing to the seminal emphasis he placed on developing the Administrative Order and the devoted efforts of the believers in response. They, moreover, continued to multiply under the direction of the Universal House of Justice. There are now around 6,000 Local Spiritual Assemblies worldwide.

The mandate of these Assemblies is expansive. They are charged with being 'channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes' (Universal House of Justice 1996). Each Assembly is ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of the city in which it is situated, attending to, among other duties,

> spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd in Shoghi Effendi 1922)

Its responsibilities also naturally concern matters internal to the Bahá'í community, including overseeing the flow of material resources; encouraging, mobilizing, and facilitating individual and collective acts of service; and ensuring the Nineteen Day Feast is organized. The Feast is the cornerstone of Bahá'í community life, offering the Bahá'ís every nineteen days the opportunity to pray and socialize together as well as to consult with the Assembly, offer suggestions, and learn about its plans.

The National Spiritual Assembly

In a letter dated 12 March 1923, Shoghi Effendi, referring to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, states that 'it is of vital importance' that National Assemblies be established in every country 'where the conditions are favorable and the number of the friends has grown and reached a considerable size, such as America, Great Britain and Germany', and that they be 'representative of the friends throughout that country' (1923c). The first three National Assemblies were established in 1923 for the British Isles, for Austria together with Germany, and for India together with Burma. As of the writing of this chapter, there are 192 administrative bodies that oversee the work of communities at the national level, the vast majority of which are National Assemblies.

As is the case with the Local Assembly, this national institution will, 'in the course of time… evolve into the National House of Justice' (ibid.). As such, one of its primary responsibilities, as designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will, is to elect the members of the Universal House of Justice. The National Assembly itself is currently elected annually by delegates from across the nation. These delegates are likewise elected annually by all adult members of the national community, who are organized into geographical electoral units for this

purpose (see the chapter ‘The Universal House of Justice’ [Smith] for more discussion on this process).

> The role of the Spiritual Assembly is to
>
> > stimulate, unify and coordinate by frequent personal consultations, the manifold activities of the friends as well as the local Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.
>
> (ibid.)

Its responsibilities are thus far-reaching, and currently involve facilitating the growth and vitality of the national community by providing necessary guidance and financial resources where needed; resolving questions raised by individuals and local institutions; fostering constructive relations with government; promoting social and economic development and other measures aimed at enhancing the material and spiritual life of society; synthesizing and disseminating relevant learning generated in regions and localities across the nation; creating unity of vision; and ensuring that individual and institutional capacity-building for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith and service to humanity is continually being strengthened. In carrying out its responsibilities, the National Assembly is encouraged by Shoghi Effendi to view itself as ‘the beating of a healthy heart in the midst of the Community, pumping spiritual love, energy and encouragement out to all the members’ (qtd in Universal House of Justice 2006).

The Hands of the Cause of God and the Institution of the Counsellors

The institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was created by Bahá’u’lláh and then defined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His Will and Testament. Bahá’u’lláh appointed four Hands of the Cause, and four more were posthumously named by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

> In His Will, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that

> [t]he obligations of the Hands of the Cause of God are to diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things. (1944)

He also admonishes them to 'manifest the fear of God by their conduct, their manners, their deeds and their words' (ibid.) and states that they are to be appointed by the Guardian of the Cause and remain under his direction. During his ministry as the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi appointed forty-two Hands of the Cause, ten of them posthumously. He also brought into being the Auxiliary Boards whose task was 'to serve the work of the Hands of the Cause and to ensure that their vital influence would permeate the Bahá'í community' (Universal House of Justice 2001a).

The Hands of the Cause played a vital role in both propagating and protecting the integrity of the Faith during the latter years of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, and notably between the time when he passed away in November 1957 and when the Universal House of Justice was first elected in April 1963. Owing to their heroic efforts, the community was able to successfully build on the momentum that had been generated under the tireless direction of Shoghi Effendi and bring the Bahá'í world to the point when the House of Justice could be established. Upon its establishment, the Hands of the Cause, also referred to as the 'Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic world commonwealth' (Universal House of Justice 1974), continued to serve under the direction of the Universal House of Justice as a constant source of inspiration, vitalizing and fortifying all elements of community life throughout the world until the passing of the last Hand of the Cause in 2007.

Soon after its election, the Universal House of Justice concluded that, with the passing of Shoghi Effendi, 'it could not legislate to make possible the appointment of additional Hands of the Cause', and that it was therefore 'necessary for it to devise a means of extending into the

future the critical functions of protection and propagation vested in these high-ranking officers of the Faith' (2001a). The House of Justice thus brought into being the Continental Boards of Counsellors in June 1968 to carry out these critical functions (ibid.). It further determined that the Auxiliary Boards would now become auxiliary institutions to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, and, in 1973, took the additional steps of establishing the International Teaching Centre at the World Centre and of authorizing Auxiliary Board members to name their own assistants.

There are now five Continental Boards of Counsellors which together comprise eighty-one Counsellors who are appointed every five years by the Universal House of Justice. (There are a total of ninety Counsellors worldwide including the nine members of the International Teaching Centre, discussed later.) Together with the Auxiliary Board members—who are in turn appointed by these continental Boards every five years, and who appoint their own assistants for varying durations—these institution members focus on

> enhancing the capacity of the Bahá'í community to devise systematic plans of action, to execute them energetically, and to learn from experience in efforts to contribute to building the world civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. They nourish love and certitude in the hearts of the Bahá'ís, fortify bonds of friendship and unity, promote principles and ethical standards enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings, and raise the vision of community members that they may dedicate their energies to the welfare of the human race.
>
> (The Bahá'í Faith, Bahai.org)

As such, they play 'a vital role in advancing the interests of the Faith', but in so doing, they are unique among religious institutional members in that they 'have no legislative, executive or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations' (Universal House of Justice 2001a). There is indeed no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, and the right to make authoritative interpretations ended with the passing of Shoghi Effendi, who alone, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was vested with this prerogative.

As to the International Teaching Centre, it ‘is charged with the tasks of coordinating, stimulating and directing the activities of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and acts as liaison between them and the Universal House of Justice’ (ibid.). Presently consisting of nine Counsellor members appointed by the Universal House of Justice every five years, the Teaching Centre operates as a corporate body the aim of which is to follow and encourage the progress of the Faith worldwide. It does so by remaining ‘alert to possibilities for’ the growth of the Bahá’í community, ‘the consolidation of its institutions, and the advancement of its collective endeavours’ (Bahai.org). It thus ‘pays particular attention to the development of human resources, helping the worldwide Bahá’í community to increase its capacity to endow growing numbers of people with the spiritual insights, knowledge, skills, and abilities required to serve humanity effectively’ (ibid.).

Recently established institutions

As noted above, and as is evident with the bringing into being of the Institution of the Counsellors and the International Teaching Centre, the Administrative Order of the Faith is organic in its development. It continually develops both in terms of the capacity of its various institutions to carry out their respective functions and in terms of the establishment of new institutions created in response to the evolving dynamics of growth.

One recently created institution is the Regional Bahá’í Council, which was formally established in some countries in May 1997 in view of the ‘expansion of the Bahá’í community and the growing complexity of the issues which [were] facing National Spiritual Assemblies in certain countries’ that had ‘brought the Cause to a new stage in its development’ (Universal House of Justice 1997). Having previously authorized the formation of State Bahá’í Councils and Regional Teaching and Administrative Committees in a few countries, the House of Justice

announced that it had ‘reached the conclusion that the time has arrived for us to formalize a new element of Bahá’í administration, between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, to be designated as “Regional Bahá’í Councils”’ (ibid.). A chief consideration in introducing this new element of the Administrative Order is the relationship between institutional centralization and decentralization, and how this relationship must evolve as the processes of community development become more complex. As explained by the House of Justice, these Councils ‘partake of some, but not all, characteristics of Spiritual Assemblies, and thus provide a means of carrying forward the teaching work and administering related affairs of a rapidly growing Bahá’í community in a number of situations’ (ibid.)—responsibilities that could no longer be carried out effectively by National Assemblies. At the same time, these national bodies would need to strengthen their ability to function in view of this new development at the regional level. The House of Justice explains this dynamic as follows:

> The greater degree of decentralization involved in the devolution of authority upon Regional Bahá’í Councils requires a corresponding increase in the capacity of the National Spiritual Assembly itself to keep fully informed of what is proceeding in all parts of the territory over which it has ultimate jurisdiction.
>
> (ibid.)

Even more recently, the Bahá’í International Development Organization was established. One of the central aims of community building that Bahá’ís are pursuing is learning how to become increasingly involved in the life of society as the work of expansion and consolidation of the Faith advances. To this end, the Universal House of Justice has called upon the Bahá’ís of the world to become more systematically engaged in social and economic development activities. In 1983, the Office of Social and Economic Development was formed at the Bahá’í World Centre to cultivate such activities, which at that time numbered in the hundreds. As of November 2018, however, they had come to ‘number in the tens of thousands, including hundreds of sustained

projects such as schools and scores of development organizations' (Universal House of Justice 2018) as well as

> efforts from villages and neighborhoods to regions and nations, addressing an array of challenges, including education from preschool to university, literacy, health, the environment, support for refugees, advancement of women, empowerment of junior youth, elimination of racial prejudice, agriculture, local economies, and village development.
>
> (ibid.)

Owing to these developments, among others, the Universal House of Justice was 'pleased to announce that the Office of Social and Economic Development now effloresces into a new world-embracing institution established at the World Centre, the Bahá'í International Development Organization' (ibid.). This organization presently consists of a five-member board of directors appointed every five years by the House of Justice. Among other duties, its mandate is described as follows:

> The new institution will begin by assuming the functions and mandate previously carried out by the Office of Social and Economic Development and then gradually grow in capacity to discharge them on an expanding scale and at higher levels of complexity. It will reinforce the efforts of Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions worldwide to extend and consolidate the range of their activities. It will help to strengthen institutional capacity for social and economic development in national communities, including through the creation of new agencies and the emergence of advanced development organizations. It will promote, on an international scale, approaches to development and methodologies that have proven effective.
>
> (ibid.)

Finally, it is important to mention two grassroots agencies that have emerged over the last couple of decades. Referred to as Area Teaching Committees and training institute coordinators, these agencies collaborate closely with the Auxiliary Board members, their assistants, and Local Spiritual Assemblies to facilitate and coordinate the expansion, consolidation, and community-building efforts in what are called clusters—small geographic areas—the boundaries of which are determined by factors such as 'culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the

social and economic life of the inhabitants' (Universal House of Justice 2001b). This institutional arrangement, which again is always evolving in response to the demands of growth, helps to ensure that the learning processes taking place at the local and neighbourhood levels are being facilitated to the greatest extent possible. The significance of the training institute in this regard is covered in some depth in the chapter 'A Culture of Learning' (Karlberg and Smith).

Relationships and the nature of power

Among his many writings on the subject, Shoghi Effendi (1929) emphasizes that Bahá'í administration should be conceived of as 'an instrument' and 'a channel', and that, as such, it 'should guard against such rigidity as would clog and fetter the liberating forces released by His Revelation'. He also states that the 'whole machinery' of the administration 'is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself' and that its various institutions and agencies 'will rise or fall according to their capacity to further the interests, to coordinate the activities, to apply the principles, to embody the ideals and execute the purpose of the Bahá'í Faith' (ibid.). This purpose includes facilitating the participation of growing numbers of individuals, from all walks of life, in a process of learning aimed at continually advancing understanding about how to effectively apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for the betterment of humankind. As such, it is informed by a distinct, yet evolving, conception of the nature of power and authority.

In this respect, the Universal House of Justice (2013a) explains that the individual, the community, and the institutions of society 'have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time'. While this struggle has taken on different forms in different societies, their relations have 'been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence' (2010b). If humanity is to now truly advance, it must transcend these difficulties by learning to function in

accordance with its fundamental interdependence. Thus, '[a]t the heart of the learning process' of the Bahá'í community 'is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society' (2013a)—that, in other words, bind what the House of Justice calls 'the three protagonists in the Divine Plan' (2010b). Most fundamentally, the aim is to increasingly develop these relationships so that they 'are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe' (ibid.). To this end,

> the institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.
>
> (2013a)

More generally, the individual, the community, and the institutions, while differing in their roles, aim to enrich one another by assisting one another to progress along a vibrant continuum of mutually reinforcing development in which the generation, application, sharing, and consolidation of knowledge can gather pace. Within such an interdependent, or organic, mode of functioning, the struggle for ascendance becomes anachronistic. The struggle is also considered self-defeating because all three protagonists appreciate that no one of them can truly excel or realize all its inherent potential while its two counterparts remain deprived: the deprivation of one of them occasions the deprivation of all three of them.

Directly tied to the relationships among the individual, the community, and the institutions is an evolving understanding of each protagonist, in its own right, that is 'appropriate for a humanity that has come of age' (Universal House of Justice 2010b). The House of Justice

provides many insights into the nature of the three protagonists, which, beginning with the community, are considered in turn below.

The community

An essential role of the community is to provide an overall sense of mission and common purpose and to sustain, as quoted above, 'an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action' (Universal House of Justice 2013a). This role is consistent with the core principle of unity in diversity. Specifically, in the absence of collective volition, the power of action of the individual remains limited. When, however, the individual joins others in a shared enterprise, his or her powers surge. Along with the whole becoming greater than the sum of its parts, when unified, the parts themselves become greater than they could ever be when they simply act independently, let alone just for themselves—or, worse yet, when they act to undermine one another. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections*) states:

> Whensoever holy souls, drawing on the powers of heaven, shall arise with such qualities of the spirit, and march in unison, rank on rank, every one of those souls will be even as one thousand, and the surging waves of that mighty ocean will be even as the battalions of the Concourse on high. What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea.

Reciprocally, 'the circle of participation' is '[thrown] wide open' (Universal House of Justice 2013b) within such a community, and 'the constructive contributions' (Universal House of Justice 2010a) of all are welcomed. This is crucial because, while collective endeavours further strengthen the individual to act, spontaneity and initiative are essential to the vitality of collective endeavours. The individual and the collective vivify each other so long as each is vigorously responsive to the other. To this end, the community serves as an 'environment in which individual effort and collective action, mediated by the institute, can complement each

other in order to achieve progress' (Universal House of Justice 2008). Within this environment of communal munificence, progress in the generation of knowledge is achieved because individuals feel inspired to work alongside each other in their efforts to jointly investigate reality and discover possibilities for growth.

The individual

By extension, the individual, while enjoying a necessary latitude of freedom, understands that his or her 'actions, untempered by the overall direction provided by authorized institutions, are incapable of attaining the thrust necessary for the unencumbered advancement of civilization' (Universal House of Justice 1994). In his or her longing to develop alongside the community and the institutions, the individual comes

> to recognize that 'wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort' are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that 'the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,' and that 'the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.'
>
> (Universal House of Justice 2010b)

One way of putting this is that the individual exercises dynamic freedom (Smith 2020). Unlike atomistic freedom in which the primary concern is the autonomy of the individual, with dynamic freedom the individual embraces his or her interdependence with fellow learners, the community, and the institutions. He or she understands that in order to truly advance in all of his or her investigatory potential, he or she is best served by selflessly serving others. Self-centredness undermines itself. Certainly, diversity is essential, but it is only when diversity is grounded in unity that it actually blooms. As with a healthy organic body, the individual parts or organs achieve their full potential when they participate in, and contribute to, the symbiotic complexity of the whole, which, reciprocally, nourishes the organs themselves.

The institutions

Such nourishing, finally, depends on the institutions, which, in their interdependence with the two other protagonists, eschew conventional practices of authority. For these institutions, power is no longer conceived of as a means of domination. Instead, this concept of power, along with 'the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, [are] left behind' (Universal House of Justice 2013a) while 'the powers of the human spirit' such as those 'of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds' (ibid.) come to the fore. The primary objective of these institutions is to '"release", "encourage", "channel", "guide" and "enable"' (ibid.).

Specifically, they seek to release the power of human agency, 'this mix of individual potentialities' (Universal House of Justice 1994). They do so by 'promoting individual initiative,… underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment' (Universal House of Justice 2005). They also strive to learn 'in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavours and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set' (ibid.). Such mechanisms include spaces in which knowledge can be meaningfully shared as well as both systems and instruments that facilitate the flow of learning, guidance, information, funds, and other resources. In these ways, they facilitate the development of a community of inquirers that are devoted to building one another's capacities to investigate the workings of reality and, to the extent possible, correlate the resulting insights and theories into more comprehensive and penetrating understandings of the way things are, of what could be, and of how to constructively advance together.

These institutions consequently embrace the notion that

> leadership is that expression of service by which the [institution] invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.
>
> (Universal House of Justice 1994)

Far from remaining aloof from the community or the individual, they strive instead to maintain 'a climate of love and unity', which they firmly believe 'depends largely upon the feeling among the individuals composing the community that the [institution] is a part of themselves' (ibid.). For it is only '[i]n such a climate' that 'the community is transformed from being the mere sum of its parts to assuming a wholly new personality as an entity in which its members blend without losing their individual uniqueness' (ibid.).

Essential features of Bahá'í administration

Shoghi Effendi (1934) highlights the historical uniqueness and virtues of the Administrative Order in the following terms:

> This new-born Administrative Order 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.

This is a vast subject that cannot be adequately addressed here. Suffice it to say that there are a number of features of Bahá'í Administration that distinguish it from other forms of government—democratic, autocratic (including ecclesiastical), aristocratic, and others—and without which the dynamic relationship among the three protagonists discussed earlier would be impossible to achieve. These include its distinctive electoral process, consultation as a mode of decision-making, the emphasis it places on collaboration, and the disposition and qualities of those elected and appointed. This essay ends with a brief overview of these essential features.

The electoral process

As discussed, Local Spiritual Assemblies and National Spiritual Assemblies are elected institutions. They currently consist of nine members elected every year on the first day of Riḍván (usually April 20th or 21st). The members of the Local Assembly are elected directly by adult members of the local community. In the future, 'as the size of the Bahá'í population and other circumstances in a locality demand,' the House of Justice may 'authorize a two-stage electoral process on a case-by-case basis' (2005). This, as noted, is already the case for the members of the National Assembly, who are elected by delegates, who are in turn elected by adult members geographically organized into electoral units across the nation. Concerning the specific age of those who may participate in elections and serve as members of Assemblies, in its message of Riḍván 2021, the Universal House of Justice, referring to the 'increasingly evident maturity' of the Bahá'í youth, states, 'while the age at which a believer becomes eligible to serve on a Spiritual Assembly shall remain twenty-one, the age at which a believer may vote in Bahá'í elections shall be lowered to eighteen'.

Importantly, elections are conducted by secret ballot; there is no campaigning or nomination process whatsoever; no one seeks election; no one shares who he or she is voting for; and everyone is proscribed from discussing who might make a good candidate for election. Instead, all are encouraged to view the voting process as a sacred obligation and to participate in the election 'in unity and amity, turning their hearts to God, detached from all things but Him, seeking His guidance and supplicating His aid and bounty' (Shoghi Effendi 1923b). Foremost on the electors' minds, moreover, is

> to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.

(Shoghi Effendi 1925)

The ramifications of this approach to elections are profound. Among them is that this approach promotes freedom in at least three ways. First, when electing the members of, say, a Local Assembly, the individual is free to vote for the nine adult members of the local community he or she feels are the most suitable to serve. Since no one is allowed to run for election, he or she is not limited to voting for individuals who manage to put themselves forward as the best candidates. Second, this approach to elections cultivates freedom of conscience because the individual is able to vote unburdened by the influences of propaganda, backbiting, the self-aggrandizement of candidates, and the partisan bickering that unduly shapes thought and polarizes an electorate. Third, because there is no electioneering, the elected individual wastes no time or resources on his or her re-election prospects. Instead, he or she is free to focus on serving to the best of his or her abilities for the entire duration of the term of service. This freedom obviously has beneficial implications for the community as well. It helps to ensure that decisions each institution makes are done so out of purity of motive and with a focus on justice, unity, and the wellbeing of all devoid of any trace of concern for the political capital of its members.

Consultation

The power of consultation to facilitate a unity in diversity of understanding, mutual learning, the discovery of truth, and agreement about the best way to solve a problem and make progress in a given situation is discussed at length in the chapter on the subject in this volume (Smith and Ghaemmaghami). Here, it is important to emphasize that consultation as a mode of decision-making is fundamental to the manner in which the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith operate. In its proper form, such decision-making is devoid of practices that are current among institutions of governance today, including propounding specific solutions for political gain; cherry picking and

distorting facts to support particular partisan objectives; using prestige and manipulation to advance personal agendas; denigrating or even vilifying those who are at odds with a given position; filibustering; and incessantly questioning a decision so that it cannot be adequately tested in practice for its viability. In this regard, Shoghi Effendi offers the following warning:

> Beware, beware lest the foul odor of the parties and peoples of foreign lands in the West, and their pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda—practices which are abhorrent even in name—should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught.
>
> (1923a)

Instead, members of Bahá'í institutions are enjoined to engage in consultation, which is considered 'spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love' ('Abdu'l-Bahá *Promulgation*), and which has profound implications for how they orient themselves and the manner in which they express themselves in the search for truth. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections*), the members

> must, when coming together, turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness….

Collaboration

The previous section emphasizes the importance of the relationships among the individual, the community, and the institutions and how these three protagonists are interdependent, mutually

reliant, and actually bound together in a common endeavour to bring about the oneness of humankind. The same holds for the various institutions themselves.

To explain, in a world where power is understood in competitive terms, where some advance at the expense of others, and particularly where there is a tendency among some to try to dominate others, it is natural to advocate for a system of checks and balances. Such a system is meant to safeguard against corruption and the threat of demagoguery and tyranny. However, in a system where power is associated with the capacities to elicit, to encourage, and to channel—where, by extension, elections and appointments to institutions are free of the pitfalls that come with factionalism and the pervasive bent of parties to define themselves against (and undermine) their adversaries for fear of losing their relevance; where personal ambition has no role; and where the foremost concern of the individual is to be of service to the common weal—the institutions, operating in their respective spheres, continually work towards fostering a spirit of reciprocity and mutual trust. The following statement of the House of Justice (2001a) regarding the relationship between the Institution of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assembly highlights the spirit of such collaboration:

> The relationship of the Continental Boards of Counsellors to National Spiritual Assemblies is one of loving cooperation between two institutions of the Faith that are serving the same ends and are eager to see the same divine confirmations descend upon the efforts of the friends to promote and firmly establish the Cause. It is an evolving relationship that becomes richer as the two institutions face the challenge of building Bahá'í communities and witness with pride the onward march of the Faith.
>
> As Continental Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies work together to ensure the expansion and consolidation of the community, the National Assemblies make all the necessary executive decisions and take responsibility for their implementation. The Counsellors bring to their functions a continental perspective which, when offered to the Assembly in the form of counsel, advice, recommendations, suggestions or commentary, enriches the latter's understanding, acquaints it with a broader experience than its own, and encourages it to maintain a world-embracing vision.

The disposition and qualities of institution members

Finally, as alluded to earlier, the capacity of the institutions to function most effectively as protagonists that elicit and channel the energies of the individual and the community towards constructive ends depends on the orientation and qualities of the institutional members themselves. To this end, the members of the institutions are admonished by Shoghi Effendi (1923c) to 'disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal'. They are, moreover, urged by the Universal House of Justice (2010b) to perform their functions 'with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity' and 'with a sense of moral rectitude' that stands 'in clear contrast to "the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests"'. Far from remaining aloof or self-involved, their primary concern is to be a source of unity and mutual upliftment and to actively foster their interdependence with the community. In this regard, it is befitting to end with the following passage from the writings of Shoghi Effendi (1927). While specifically addressing the duties of the members of a National Spiritual Assembly, it captures the essence of what such an approach to leadership and administration entails:

> Let it be made clear to every inquiring reader that among the most outstanding and sacred duties incumbent upon those who have been called upon to initiate, direct and coordinate the affairs of the Cause, are those that require them to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve. Theirs is the duty to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments, the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote. Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short, from every word and deed that might savor of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the

most humble and insignificant members of the Bahá'í family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the spirit of individual initiative and enterprise, and fortify the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all Local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.

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