

II. Relation to Convention

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi

Original English



II. Relation to Convention

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Hitherto the National Convention has been primarily called together for the consideration of the various circumstances attending the election of the National Spiritual Assembly. I feel, however, that in view of the expansion and the growing importance of the administrative sphere of the Cause, the general sentiments and tendencies prevailing among the friends, and the signs of increasing interdependence among the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world, the assembled accredited representatives of the American believers should exercise not only the vital and responsible right of electing the National Assembly, but should also fulfil the functions of an enlightened, consultative and co-operative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly.

It is my firm conviction that it is the bounden duty, in the interests of the Cause we all love and serve, of the members of the incoming National Assembly, once elected by the delegates at Convention time, to seek and have the utmost regard, individually as well as collectively, for the advice, the considered opinion and the true sentiments of the assembled delegates. Banishing every vestige of secrecy, of undue reticence, of dictatorial aloofness, from their midst, they should radiantly and abundantly unfold to the eyes of the delegates, by whom they are elected, their plans, their hopes, and their cares. They should familiarize the delegates with the various matters that will have to be considered in the current year, and calmly and conscientiously study and weigh the opinions and judgments of the delegates. The newly elected National Assembly, during the few days when the Convention is in session and after the dispersal of the delegates, should seek ways and means to cultivate understanding, facilitate and maintain the exchange of views, deepen confidence, and vindicate by every tangible evidence their one desire to serve and advance the common weal. Not infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored, and inexperienced among the friends will, by the sheer inspiring force of selfless and ardent devotion, contribute a distinct and



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memorable share to a highly involved discussion in any given assembly. Great must be the regard paid by those whom the delegates call upon to serve in high position to this all-important though inconspicuous manifestation of the revealing power of sincere and earnest devotion.

The National Spiritual Assembly, however, in view of the unavoidable limitations imposed upon the convening of frequent and long-standing sessions of the Convention, will have to retain in its hands the final decision on all matters that affect the interests of the Cause in America, such as the right to decide whether any Local Assembly is functioning in accordance with the principles laid down for the conduct and the advancement of the Cause. It is my earnest prayer that they will utilize their highly responsible position, not only for the wise and efficient conduct of the affairs of the Cause, but also for the extension and deepening of the spirit of cordiality and whole-hearted and mutual support in their co-operation with the body of their co-workers throughout the land.

The seating of delegates to the Convention, i.e. the right to decide upon the validity of the credentials of the delegates at a given Convention is vested in the outgoing National Assembly, and the right to decide who has the voting privilege is also ultimately placed in the hands of the National Spiritual Assembly, either when a Local Spiritual Assembly is for the first time being formed in a given locality or when differences arise between a new applicant and an already established Local Assembly. While the Convention is in session and the accredited delegates have already elected from among the believers throughout the country the members of the National Spiritual Assembly for the current year, it is of infinite value and a supreme necessity that as far as possible all matters requiring immediate decision should be fully and publicly considered, and an endeavour be made to obtain after mature deliberation unanimity in vital decisions. Indeed it has ever been the cherished desire of our Master 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the friends in their councils, local as well as national, should by their candour, their honesty of purpose, their singleness of mind, and the thoroughness of their discussions achieve unanimity in all things. Should this in certain cases prove impracticable the verdict of the majority should prevail, to which decision the minority must under all circumstances gladly, spontaneously and continually submit.

Nothing short of the all-encompassing, all-pervading power of His Guidance and Love can enable this newly-enfolded order to gather strength and flourish amid the storm and stress of a turbulent age, and in the fullness of time vindicate its high claim to be universally recognized as the one Haven of abiding felicity and peace.

From a letter 29 January 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 78

In connection with the annual holding of the Bahá'í Convention and Congress, I feel that although such a representative body need not be convened necessarily every year, yet it is highly desirable, in view of the unique functions it fulfils in promoting harmony and goodwill, in removing misunderstandings and in enhancing the prestige of the Cause, that the National Spiritual Assembly should exert itself to gather together annually the elected representatives of the American believers. It would in some ways be obviously convenient and eminently desirable, though not absolutely essential, if the National Spiritual Assembly could arrange that the holding of such a Congress should synchronize with the time at which the national elections are renewed, and that both events should take place, if not on the first of Ridván, at least during the twelve joyous days of what may be justly regarded as the foremost Bahá'í Festival.

Apart from the local elections, which universally are to be renewed on the 21st of April, it is entirely left to the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly to decide, after having given due consideration to the above-mentioned observations, on whatever time and place the Bahá'í Convention as well as the annual elections are to be held. Were the National Spiritual Assembly to decide after mature deliberation to omit the holding of the Bahá'í Convention and Congress in a given year, then they could, only in such a case, devise ways and means to ensure that the annual election of the National Spiritual Assembly should be held by mail, provided it can be conducted with sufficient thoroughness, efficiency and dispatch.

It would also appear to me unobjectionable to enable and even to require in the last resort such delegates as cannot possibly undertake the journey to the seat of the Bahá'í Convention to send their votes, for the election of the National Spiritual Assembly only, by mail to the National Secretary, as in my view the advantages of such a procedure outweigh the considerations referred to in your letter. It should however be made clear to every elected delegate — who should be continually reminded — that it is a sacred responsibility and admittedly preferable to attend if possible in person the sessions of the Convention, to take an active part in all its proceedings, and to acquaint his fellow-workers on his return with the accomplishments, the decisions, and the aspirations of the assembled representatives of the American believers.

From a letter 24 October 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í Administration', p. 91

The Guardian wishes the National Spiritual Assembly to remind, and make it quite clear to, the believers in that land that the supreme body in the United States and Canada, whose privilege and function is to lay down, amend and abrogate the administrative principles of the Faith with the approval of the Guardian, is not the Convention, however representative it may be, but the National Spiritual Assembly. On the other hand, it is the sacred obligation and the primary function of the National Assembly not to restrict, under any circumstances, the freedom of the assembled delegates, whose twofold function is to elect their national representatives and to submit to them any recommendations they may feel inclined to make.

The function of the Convention is purely advisory and though the advice it gives is not binding in its effects on those on whom rests the final decision in purely administrative matters, yet, the utmost caution and care should be exercised lest anything should hamper the delegates in the full and free exercise of their functions. In discharging this sacred function no influence whatever, no pressure from any quarter, even though it be from the National Assembly, should under any circumstances affect their views or restrict their freedom. The delegates must be wholly independent of any administrative agency, must approach their task with absolute detachment and must concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues.

The Guardian believes that the right to elect the Chairman and the Secretary of the Convention should be vested in the assembled delegates, lest any objection be raised that the members of the outgoing National Assembly are seeking to direct the course of the discussions in a manner that would be conducive to their own personal interests. The National Assembly, however, must at all times vigilantly uphold, defend, justify and enforce the provisions of the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, which are binding on the Convention no less than on themselves. The National Spiritual Assembly has the right to lay down, enforce and interpret the National Constitution of the Bahá'ís in that land. It cannot, if it wishes to remain faithful to that Constitution, lay down any regulations, however secondary in character, that would in the least hamper the unrestricted liberty of the delegates to advise and elect those whom they feel best combine the necessary qualifications for membership of so exalted a body.

Non-delegates, however, according to the Guardian's considered opinion, should not be given the right to intervene directly during the sessions of the Convention. Only through an accredited delegate should they be given indirectly the chance to voice their sentiments and to participate in the deliberations of the Convention. Much confusion and complications must inevitably result, in the days to come, if such a restriction be not imposed on a gathering which is primarily intended for the accredited delegates of the Bahá'í communities. Bearing this restriction in mind, it is

the duty of the National Spiritual Assembly to devise ways and means which would enable them to obtain valuable suggestions, not only from the total number of the elected delegates, but from as large a body of their fellow-workers as is humanly possible.

Shoghi Effendi has not departed from any established administrative principle. He feels he has neither curtailed the legitimate authority of the National Spiritual Assembly, nor invested the Convention with undue powers enabling it to rival or supersede those whom it has to elect. What the Guardian is aiming at is to remind the friends, more fully than before, of the two cardinal principles of Bahá'í Administration, namely, the supreme and unchallengeable authority of the National Spiritual Assembly in national affairs and working within the limits imposed by the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, and the untrammelled freedom of the Convention delegates to advise, deliberate on the actions, and appoint the successors of their National Assembly. The Guardian is confident that you will elucidate and give the widest publicity to these already established principles, upon which the progress, the unity and welfare of Bahá'í administrative institutions must ultimately depend.

Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi:

The utmost care and vigilance should be exercised lest any fresh misunderstandings arise regarding these fundamental issues. The root principle of Bahá'í Administration is unreservedly maintained. No departure from its established tenets is contemplated. The undisputed authority of America's supreme Bahá'í Administrative Body has been reaffirmed, while, on the other hand, the untrammelled freedom of individual believers and delegates to exercise their functions has been once again reaffirmed and strengthened. On the continuous and harmonious co-operation of the two leading Bahá'í institutions in America the growth and success of the Administration bequeathed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá must ultimately depend. May next year's Convention witness the triumph of these basic principles.

From a letter 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

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Concerning the status, rights and prerogatives of the Annual Bahá'í Convention, the Guardian wishes to make it quite clear to all the believers that this annual meeting of the delegates is by no means a continuous consultative body all through the year; that its twofold function of electing the body of the National Spiritual Assembly, and of offering any constructive suggestions in regard to the general administration of the Cause is limited to a definite period; and that consequently the opinion current among some of the believers that the delegates are to serve as a consultative body throughout

the year is at variance with the fundamental, though as yet unspecified, principles underlying the Administration.

Shoghi Effendi firmly believes that consultation must be maintained between the National Spiritual Assembly and the entire body of the believers, and that such a consultation, when the Convention is not in session, can best be maintained through the agency of the Local Assemblies, one of whose essential functions is to act as intermediaries between the local communities and their national representatives. The main purpose of the Nineteen Day Feasts is to enable individual believers to offer any suggestion to the Local Assembly, which in its turn will pass it to the National Spiritual Assembly. The Local Assembly is, therefore, the proper medium through which local Bahá'í communities can communicate with the body of the national representatives. The Convention should be regarded as a temporary gathering, having certain specific functions to perform during a limited period of time. Its status is thus limited in time to the Convention sessions, the function of consultation at all other times being vested in the entire body of the believers through the Local Spiritual Assemblies.

Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi:

I wish to affirm, without the least hesitation or ambiguity, that the annual Convention is not to be regarded as a body entitled to exercise functions similar to those which an ordinary parliament possesses under a democratic form of government. The Administrative Order which lies embedded in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and which the American believers have championed and are now establishing, should, under no circumstances, be identified with the principles underlying present-day democracies. Nor is it identical with any purely aristocratic or autocratic form of government, the objectionable features inherent in each of these political systems are entirely avoided. It blends, as no system of human polity has as yet achieved, those salutary truths and beneficial elements which constitute the valuable contributions which each of these forms of government have made to society in the past.

Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order. Authority is concentrated in the hands of the elected members of the National Assembly. Power and initiative are primarily vested in the entire body of the believers acting through their local representatives. To generate those forces which must give birth to the body of their national administrators, and to confer, freely and fully and at fixed intervals, with both the incoming and outgoing National Assemblies, are the twofold functions, the supreme responsibility and sole prerogative of the delegates assembled in Convention. Nothing short of close and constant interaction between these various organs of Bahá'í administration can enable it to fulfil its high destiny.

From a letter 18 November 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

Concerning the status of members of the National Spiritual Assembly at Convention sessions the Guardian feels that the members of both the incoming and the outgoing Assemblies should be given the full right to participate in the Convention discussions. Those members of the National Spiritual Assembly who have been elected delegates will, in addition to the right of participation, be entitled to vote. The Guardian wishes thereby to render more effective the deliberations and the recommendations of the national representatives. He feels that the exercise of such a right by the members of the National Spiritual Assembly will enable them to consult more fully with the assembled delegates, to exchange fully and frankly with them their views, and to consider collectively the interests, needs and requirements of the Cause. This, he believes, is one of the primary functions of the Convention.

From a letter 25 December 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, 'Bahá'í News' 81, February 1934, p. 3

In connection with the circular letter you have sent the Local Assemblies in order to define the specific rights and functions of the Annual Bahá'í Convention, and to explain once more the relationships binding that body to the National Spiritual Assembly, the Guardian wishes me to again affirm his view that the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly is undivided and unchallengeable in all matters pertaining to the administration of the Faith throughout the United States and Canada, and that, therefore, the obedience of individual Bahá'ís, delegates, groups, and Assemblies to that authority is imperative, and should be whole-hearted and unqualified. He is convinced that the unreserved acceptance and complete application of this vital provision of the Administration is essential to the maintenance of the highest degree of unity among the believers, and is indispensable to the effective working of the administrative machinery of the Faith in every country.

Hoping that through your efforts the friends will co-operate in carrying out the Guardian's instructions on this point, and with the renewed assurance of his prayers and supplications on your behalf, and on behalf of your collaborators in the National Assembly.

From a letter 11 June 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada

