

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

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Transmitted by email

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

One of the distinguishing features of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is the Bahá'í Administrative Order, the nucleus and pattern of the future World Order He has promised. A fundamental aspect of the endeavours of the friends to upraise that Order is the election by believers in locations across the globe of their delegates to the National Convention, occasions which also allow for discussions regarding local and national affairs. These delegates, in turn, will “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.” In addition, it is they, as Shoghi Effendi explained, who have the great privilege and delicate task “to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause”. It behooves each National Assembly, then, to do everything possible to assist the friends to become conscious of their vital obligation and to facilitate the participation of the greatest number in the election of the delegates.

As stated in the by-laws of a National Spiritual Assembly, delegates are chosen under the principle of proportionate representation. In a letter dated 21 July 1985 to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice indicated that delegates to National Conventions everywhere would be elected on the basis of electoral units. To this end, a National Assembly would divide the territory under its jurisdiction into electoral units, based on the number of adult Bahá'ís in each area, in such a way that each unit would be responsible for electing preferably one delegate only. However, in some instances, a unit could be made large enough to be the electoral base for several delegates. Although a convention is usually called in each unit, the House of Justice indicated that if holding a unit convention was not effective or viable, National Assemblies were free to explore other methods of facilitating the process of voting, such as dividing electoral units into sub-units or establishing polling stations where the friends could leave their ballots on the voting day.

Since 2001, the division of countries into clusters has greatly enhanced the administration of affairs related to the expansion and consolidation of the community. When determining the boundaries of clusters, National Assemblies generally took into consideration such factors as culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants. Within the boundaries of a cluster the believers are able to interact with greater ease, to develop strong bonds of friendship, to serve together in common projects, to think about the growth of the Faith on a manageable scale, and to design and implement plans close to the grassroots of the community. As anticipated, other administrative processes of the Faith

have not remained unaffected by such developments at the level of the cluster. In this regard, a number of National Assemblies have found it prudent to establish electoral units on the basis of cluster boundaries, thus drawing upon the positive dynamics generated by the expansion and consolidation of the community to reinforce and reinvigorate the electoral process related to unit conventions.

Over time, several aspects of this approach have become clear. In an area of a country with a relatively sparse Bahá'í population, a unit may include a number of clusters, while a cluster with a high population of believers might constitute a single unit, and perhaps even require the allocation of more than one delegate in accordance with the principle of proportionality. The House of Justice has followed with interest this approach to delineating electoral unit boundaries and urges all National Assemblies that have not done so to consider the viability of implementing it for the current year. The Assembly should ensure that the divisions, wherever possible, are made in such a way that each unit has at least one community with a well-established pattern of growth in which the unit convention can be held.

There may be cases where the National Assembly would need to apply other criteria—for example, in small countries with very few clusters, the manner of division outlined above may result in allocating a large number of delegates to a single unit. In such instances, the area of jurisdiction of Local Spiritual Assemblies could be used as the boundary; however, under no circumstances should such a locality be divided between electoral units. In other cases, for example in countries that have several well-functioning communities situated far apart, a cluster could be divided into a number of separate units, or into several sub-units. If electoral units are divided into sub-units, it will be important to remember that the delegates to be elected represent the entire unit, and therefore each voter has all the adult believers resident in the entire unit to choose from.

In allocating delegates under the principle of proportionate representation—that is, in direct proportion to the number of adult believers residing in each unit—it would not be correct to use the degree of activity of the believers as a criterion. Beyond this, however, National Assemblies have a certain latitude in interpreting the information they have on the Bahá'í population in their countries. For instance, it is possible for them to maintain a list of believers with known addresses, and another list of those whose addresses are unknown. Maintaining two lists in this fashion does not reduce the figure for the total number of Bahá'ís, and the Assembly is then free to assign delegates according to the adult believers with known addresses. In those countries where a significant advance has been made in entering data into the Statistical Report Program, the population figures in the Program can be considered to be an accurate representation of the number of believers about whom information is known and used when allocating delegates to the electoral units.

It is the responsibility of the National Assembly to allocate delegates to units within the country and to decide all matters of detail regarding the methods and procedures by which the elections will take place in each unit. In countries where Regional Bahá'í Councils have been established, the National Assembly may ask them to oversee the arrangement of unit elections. Given that the Councils are well familiar with the realities of the communities within the region, they may also be requested to submit a proposal for the division of their regions into electoral units, including sub-units, for the review and approval of the National Assembly. In all countries, details related to the actual holding of unit conventions or sub-unit meetings are usually devolved to Local Assemblies. In the absence of a strong Local Assembly, this task may be entrusted to a committee.

An imperative for those responsible for organizing the unit convention is to ensure that all the adult believers residing in a unit are provided ample opportunity to cast their ballots for electing their delegate. In this regard, careful attention will need to be given to the choice of venue, including those for sub-unit conventions, in order to afford the friends easy access. As there are occasions when the friends gather to discuss the affairs of their community and the progress of the Cause, reflection meetings for example, consideration could be given to having the believers cast their ballots at a unit convention held on the same day as such meetings. For those friends who are unable to attend the unit convention, arrangements may be made to receive their ballots at the Nineteen Day Feast or a specially designated venue, or by mail. Ballots may also be accepted by telephone, email, text message, or online, if the institution overseeing the election is able to reliably identify the person who is voting and to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.

Everything possible should be done to ensure that delegates, once elected, attend the National Convention, where they carry out their responsibilities as summarized in the 16 May 2013 letter from the Universal House of Justice. In some countries there may be formidable obstacles preventing full attendance, but the National Assembly can learn over time to facilitate maximum participation. For instance, the long distances some delegates must travel in order to attend the National Convention may create a financial burden they are unable to bear. In general in such cases, if a delegate is unable to pay his or her own travel costs, the believers from the electoral unit from which the delegate comes should be encouraged to defray such expenses. If funds are unavailable from this source, delegates may approach the National Assembly to seek assistance; however, it would not be wise for an Assembly to apply a policy of fully reimbursing all the delegates. This would not prevent it, of course, from considering the situation of each delegate and deciding whether it could assist with his or her participation at National Convention. Those delegates who cannot attend should nevertheless exercise their spiritual obligation to vote for the membership of the incoming National Assembly.

Since the inception of the new series of Plans aimed at the systematic acceleration of the process of entry by troops, the community of the Greatest Name has gained much insight about the evolution of the Administrative Order in light of the principles enshrined in the Writings and the precious experience related to growth that has been accumulated in cities, towns, and villages in the four corners of the earth. A well-ordered electoral process implemented in accordance with the Bahá'í Teachings is a key component of the healthy development of the institutions of the Faith. Unit conventions provide a venue to deepen the understanding of the friends about the unique nature of Bahá'í elections, and wholehearted participation in the election of delegates to the National Convention affords an opportunity for every responsible, conscientious believer to develop deeper bonds of love and enhance a spiritual connection with his or her National Spiritual Assembly. That the friends will come forward, in ever-increasing numbers, to perform this sacred obligation is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice. Rest assured of its prayers in the Holy Shrines that divine bestowals may accompany you in your diligent efforts towards this end.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre
Boards of Counsellors
Counsellors