

Bahá'í Consultation and the Transformation of Society

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Abstract: This paper looks at consultation in the Bahá'í Faith. It starts from the mention of this process in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* and the manner in which this was initially put into practice in Iran in the late 1870s. It then looks at the ways in which each of the successive leaders of the Bahá'í Faith — Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi emphasized the importance of consultation and promoted its use in the community. Finally, the paper looks at the role of consultation in the transformation of society from the present established and customary practices in the world towards the new World Order that Bahá'u'lláh envisaged.

Consultation in Tribal Societies and in the Bible

The concept of consultation is a very important one sociologically since it signals a move away from authoritarianism towards a situation where the leaders ask the opinions of others before taking decisions. It seems to be common in tribal societies that the elders consult when an important decision is to be made, even if in many cases, it is the leader who makes the final decision. It is possible to find this type of consultation referred to in the Bible for example: "Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. 'How would you advise me to answer these people?' he asked." (1 Kings 12:6)

There is also advice on consulting in the Book of Proverbs:

A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel. (Proverbs 1:5)

Prepare plans by consultation, and make war by wise guidance. (Proverbs 20:18)

Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22)

Consultation in Islam

The Arabic for consultation comes from the root *shin-waw-ra* – root form *shára* means to extract honey from a hive, or from a hollow or from other places where it has been placed by wild bees. From this derived the meaning of extracting or making known a matter (e.g. making known one's thoughts about a matter) and hence in the mutual forms of the verb, the third and sixth forms, the meaning of mutually making known one's thoughts – and hence the meaning of consultation emerges.

In Islam, there has been a general idea that consultation is a good thing. This is based on the authority of the Qur'an where Muhammad is commanded by God to consult with the people whom he rules over in Mecca: "It is part of the Mercy of God that thou dost deal gently with them. Werd thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (God's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast Taken a decision put thy trust in God. For God loves those who put their trust (in Him)" (Qur'an 3:159). Those who order their affairs by mutual consultation are commended (42:38). Consultation is also exhorted upon the Muslims in the family; for example, the parents are urged to consult abut weaning a baby (2:233).

However, these injunctions are vague as to the details of who should be consulted and about what. There is a little more specificity in the Traditions. For example: “‘Ali asked, ‘O Prophet! If we have a matter in which we do not find a command or prohibition then what is your advice?’ He said, ‘Consult the righteous wise people and do not depend upon individual opinion.’”

In the strongly patriarchal and hierarchical society of early Islam, the role of consultation was more or less immediately relegated to the process of choosing a leader, but once the leader was chosen, there seems to have been little idea that he should use consultation in his rule over the people. The first caliph, Abú Bakr, was chosen by a general consultation of those Muslims at the portico of the Banú Sa`d immediately after the death of the prophet. However, important elements of Islamic society were missing from that consultation, in particular `Alí and the family of the Prophet. The second caliph was appointed by the first caliph. The third caliph was appointed by a consultative assembly of six people chosen by the second caliph. The fourth caliph, `Alí, was chosen by general acclamation of the people of Medina and many elements of the Muslim community were not consulted. After this, Mu`áwiyah seized the caliphate and the succession to the caliphate became either hereditary or seized by force down to 1924 when it was abolished. While the classical Sunni jurists continued to recommend consultation (*shúrah*) in the process of electing a caliph, they do not appear to have thought that it played a role in the administration of an Islamic state. Thus, in Sunni Islam, the principle of consultation, while talked about in principle, was largely ignored in practice until modern times which we will consider shortly. Since the consultations that were held to decide the first and third caliph resulted in decisions against `Alí, consultation has never been held in high regard among Shi`i Muslims.

Many Islamic tribal societies have ruled their affairs by calling consultative councils of elders but it is not clear whether

this practice arose out of Islam or was part of the tribe's customary practice even before the conversion to Islam. In modern times, Islamic reformers have argued that the Quranic injunction to consult is the equivalent of modern democracy. And so decisions arrived at through parliamentary processes can be considered to be in accordance with the Qur'an. Conservative scholars reject this idea and say that *shúrah* was only intended as a means for giving advice to the ruler and not for making decisions. Even then it is not obligatory for the ruler to pay attention to the advice given. Moreover, there is no place for non-Muslims in the *shúrah* process.

Modern Democracy

Interestingly, the processes that led to modern democracy do not seem to have been much influenced by any of the calls to consult described above in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There are two main forms of democracy, direct and representative. Direct democracy stems from ancient Greece and involves convocations of all of the citizenry (which excluded women, slaves, foreigners, non-landowners, and males under 20 years old) who voted on important matters. The main surviving examples of this form of democracy in the modern world is the town meetings in small towns in New England in the United States and in the smaller Swiss municipalities. For obvious reasons, this form of democracy cannot be scaled up for communities of much more than 6-10,000. However, some people have considered that binding referenda are a comparable phenomenon, although limited in that they are typically only organized for major decisions and thus only occur rarely.

Representative democracy, although commonly stated to have originated in Rome, stems more from the struggles in the Middle Ages by the barons to limit the power of the king, which led in England to the Magna Carta in 1215, in which the king's absolute authority was constrained by the concept of due process and there were provisions that taxation could not be

imposed without “common counsel of our realm” (Clauses 12 and 14) – thus establishing a need for a parliament which was first called in 1265. After the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the English Bill of Rights of 1689 was enacted, and this together with the Reform Act of 1832 established Parliamentary representative democracy as it is known in England. The vote was finally given to women in 1928. Thus at first the barons and aristocrats obtained a say in the running of the country, then propertied males, then all males, then women. The same general process can be described in other countries – none of which had any involvement of the religious principles of consultation.

History of Bahá'í consultation – Bahá'u'lláh

The history of consultation in the Bahá'í Faith starts with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in which there is a verse establishing Houses of Justice in every locality and instructing that the members should take counsel together:

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá, and should it exceed this number it doth not matter. They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God, the Exalted, the Most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen. It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive. (KA v. 30)

But in Questions and Answers there is also advice on how consultation could take place in other circumstances (and the Universal House of Justice has confirmed that this approach may be used for example in resolving personal problems):

99. QUESTION: Concerning consultation.

ANSWER: If consultation among the first group of people assembled endeth in disagreement, new people should be added, after which persons to the number of the Greatest Name, or fewer or more, shall be chosen by lot. Whereupon the consultation shall be renewed, and the outcome, whatever it is, shall be obeyed. If, however, there is still disagreement, the same procedure should be repeated once more, and the decision of the majority shall prevail. He, verily, guideth whomsoever He pleaseth to the right way. (KA 13)

Towards the end of his life, Bahá'u'lláh became more and more insistent on the importance of consultation. For example in the *Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*, he states:

The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding. (TB 168)

There are many other quotations from Bahá'u'lláh about consultation, stating that “*in all things, it is necessary to consult,*” (CC1 93) and that “*No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.*” (CC1 93)

There are also examples from history that demonstrate the importance that Bahá'u'lláh attached to consultation:

1. When the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* first came to Iran, the Bahá'ís there started to try to implement its provisions. Mírzá

Asadu'lláh Işfahání who was then in Tehran tried to implement some of the administrative instructions in the book. With regard to verse 30, he had no guidance beyond what was in the text and so he applied his own cultural norms to this. He called together, in 1294/1877, some of the prominent Bahá'ís and called this gathering the Assembly of Consultation (*majlis-i shawr*) and the house in which they met the House of Justice. The cultural norms of that society and that time (and indeed of the whole world at that time) was that it was only the elite whose opinions were worth hearing and who should therefore be invited to the consultation.

This group consulted about the affairs of the community, in secret. The minutes of their meetings exist and show that it was decided in 1880 to send three of their number on journeys though Iran to spread the practices of dawn prayers, assemblies of consultation and communal funds. Ibn-i Aşdaq and Mírzá Asadu'lláh Işfahání travelled to Mázandarán and Khurásán, with the latter going on to Yazd and Işfahán, while Hájí Mírzá Hāydar `Alí Işfahání went to Hamadán.¹ When Ibn-i Aşdaq informed Bahá'u'lláh of the above-mentioned decision of the assembly of consultation that he and Mírzá Asadu'lláh should proceed to Khurásán, Bahá'u'lláh replied that although he had previously indicated his wish that Ibn-i Aşdaq should remain in the Tehran area, since the decision to go to Khurásán had been arrived at through consultation, He accepted (*maqbúl*) the decision.²

2. When Ibn-i Abhar was forced to leave his hometown of Abhar, he travelled to `Akká. While there he asked Bahá'u'lláh where he should take up his residence. Although Bahá'u'lláh was perhaps better informed about the conditions of the various Bahá'í communities in Iran and elsewhere and could easily have given instructions, he replied that Ibn-i Abhar should return to Iran and consult with the Bahá'ís there about this matter.³

So these appear to be examples of the importance that Bahá'u'lláh attached to the process of consultation and the

manner in which He indicated its importance by subordinating His own guidance to that arrived at by consultation.

`Abdu'l-Bahá

`Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a great deal about consultation. He stated that “*consultation is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice*” (CC1 97) and laid out the spiritual prerequisites for those taking part (CC1 99), emphasising that it should be used for both personal matters (“*Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs*” [CC1 98]), that individuals should consult the Bahá’ís administrative institutions (CC1 94) and that the Bahá’í administrative institutions should themselves conduct their affairs and make their decisions through consultation. (CC1 95)

From the early days of his ministry, `Abdu'l-Bahá established the Tehran Assembly (in 1897) through instructing the four Hands of the Cause to select a number of other individuals and form this assembly. He sent individuals such as Ibn-i Abhar around Iran with instructions to set up assemblies of consultation wherever there were Bahá’í communities of a sufficient size. At first in Iran these were appointed bodies but gradually, starting in America, these became elected bodies.

When `Abdu'l-Bahá was in Chicago and had just laid the foundation stone of the House of Worship there and the convention of the Bahá’í Temple Unity was still in session, he declined to speak about the House of Worship. Later he said that if he had spoken, he would have said that the building of the House of Worship should take place immediately, but it should be a matter for the consultative assembly.⁴

Shoghi Effendi

Shoghi Effendi was greatly concerned during his ministry with building up the Bahá’í administration and with issuing guidance regarding Bahá’í consultation. As part of this, he

frequently emphasised the importance of the process of consultation for arriving at decisions in the administrative order and also the importance of Bahá'ís obeying such decisions. In only his second letter to the North American Bahá'ís, Shoghi Effendi related the story that when Shaykh Faraju'lláh al-Kurdí had submitted his Arabic translation of the *Ishráqát* to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the latter, although he was perhaps the best person to judge the quality of the translation, nevertheless instructed the Shaykh to submit his translation to the Spiritual Assembly of Cairo for their approval before publication:

So great is the importance and so supreme is the authority of these assemblies that once 'Abdu'l-Bahá after having himself and in his own handwriting corrected the translation made into Arabic of the *Ishráqát* (the *Effulgences*) by Sheikh Faraj, a Kurdish friend from Cairo, directed him in a Tablet to submit the above-named translation to the Spiritual Assembly of Cairo, that he may seek from them before publication their approval and consent. These are His very words in that Tablet:- "His honor, Sheikh Faraju'lláh, has here rendered into Arabic with greatest care the *Ishráqát* and yet I have told him that he must submit his version to the Spiritual Assembly of Egypt, and I have conditioned its publication upon the approval of the above-named Assembly. This is so that things may be arranged in an orderly manner, for should it not be so any one may translate a certain Tablet and print and circulate it on his own account. Even a non-believer might undertake such work, and thus cause confusion and disorder. If it be conditioned, however, upon the approval of the Spiritual Assembly, a translation prepared, printed and circulated by a non-believer will have no recognition whatever." (BA 23)

And Shoghi Effendi himself set an example to all Bahá'ís of the need to submit to the results of the consultation of the

assemblies of the administrative order. When he had completed his translation of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, he sent it to the United States NSA for publication together with a letter from his secretary saying:

As Shoghi Effendi has been emphasizing the need of submitting all publications to the Reviewing Committee, he wants to be the first to abide by that rule, though he hopes that they will not make unnecessary delay.⁵

So what has been presented so far in this article are examples of all three of the central figures in the Bahá'í Faith emphasizing the importance of consultation in their writings and underlining its importance and setting an example for all Bahá'ís by being willing to subordinate their own guidance and decisions and work to the decisions arrived at through consultation by Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions.

Theoretical considerations – the Bahá'í transformation of society

In the survey above, examples were given of the use of consultation in religions historically. But as mentioned there, these examples relate to religion giving approval to the practice by leaders of consulting with the elders and the elite, before making a decision. It is really only through secular democratic processes that the power to choose their own leaders has been extended to all adults. Even so, by their hegemonic control of the media and education and the ability that this gives them to shape the norms of society, it is still white wealthy males who occupy most of the higher positions in Western societies and are thus the ones making the decisions for everyone else.

What we appear to see in the Bahá'í Faith is an attempt to end the present hierarchical structures of society – where power is constructed in a pyramid and only a few at the top of the pyramid hold power – and create a more egalitarian society – where every individual is encouraged to form and express

opinions in a consultative process that can then play a meaningful role in the decision-making process.

In doing this, the Bahá'í system can be seen as a fusion of the traditional religious concept of consultation with the secular concepts of both direct and representative democracy. The overall result is, ideally, the involvement of all adult Bahá'ís (and to an extent youth⁶) in the process of decision making both directly in the matter of local affairs and also through representatives in the national and global Bahá'í administrative order. It is easiest to discuss these three elements in the order in which they became applied historically in the Bahá'í community:

1. Representative democracy. Bahá'ís directly elect a local spiritual assembly in every locality where there is a sufficiently large community to do so. They indirectly (through elected representative at a national convention) elect a national spiritual assembly, which in turn directly elects the Universal House of Justice. This is a system of representative democracy – although it differs somewhat in that the elected members of the institutions are not answerable to their electors. These Bahá'í elected institutions make their decisions through consultation and 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that *“It is incumbent upon every one not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it...”* (CC1 94)

The institutions elected through this process have ultimate authority over a Bahá'í community. But at the same time, are exhorted to consult with the Bahá'ís under their jurisdiction so that the right balance between this authority and the rights of the individual can be maintained:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and

justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other. (BA 63)

2. Consultation. Both Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about the importance of consultation and Shoghi Effendi provided the structure and the principles by which Bahá'í consultation should occur. The important point about Bahá'í consultation is that it is not a consultation of the elite. When there is consultation at the Nineteen-Day Feast, for example, all of those present may participate and if a vote is taken on a resolution to send to the local spiritual assembly, then all voting members vote. The chairman has no casting vote and does not dictate the agenda, but is responsible for ensuring that the consultation is not dominated by aggressive or dominating individuals and that even those who may be reticent are encouraged to speak.

In the Bahá'í authoritative texts, it is emphasized that Bahá'í method of consultation is a skill to be learned. (CC2 96) In the last decade, Bahá'ís have been going through a sequence of courses. Part of the training imparted in these courses is to enable people to think about issues and to express their thoughts in consultation with others. This training is very important for the large numbers of people in any community who have been relegated to the lowest level in the power pyramid, sometimes because of their lack of education or intellectual capacity, but also often because of their gender, race, religion or class. Such individuals have experienced all their lives the fact that their opinions do not matter, have been told what to think about issues by the newspapers and television and have learned to remain silent when those higher up the pyramid have been present. They need to be trained to think for themselves about issues (and not just to repeat what they have been told to think) and to have the confidence to express those thoughts in the consultation setting.

3. Direct Democracy. The most recent element in the present complex of Bahá'í decision making is the local Reflection Meeting. Here all those interested meet to consider the needs of the locality and to consult about both what has happened in the previous period (and what lessons may be drawn from this) and also to draw up a plan of action for the forthcoming period. The focus of the consultation is to promote the welfare and prosperity of the local area. At a minimum this involves organising children's classes, junior youth empowerment programmes and devotional meetings as well as the sequence of training courses mentioned above. But as the community develops, then other needs of the community can be addressed and plans for action drawn up.

All present at Reflection Meetings may engage in the consultation and thus be part of the decision-making process regarding the plans of action. This may include individuals who are not Bahá'ís but are interested to carry forward this programme of action; this group of people are called the "community of interest". This is an important development since not only are the voiceless gender, racial, and class elements in society being given a voice but also, probably for the first time in religious history, the boundary between believer and non-believer is also being broken down. This development means a change towards a situation where everyone in a locality really can be "*one spirit, one soul, leaves of one tree, flowers of one garden, waves of one ocean*" (PUP 23). In addition, a number of groups of people who may feel excluded from the Bahá'í community because they do not feel able to keep the laws of Bahá'u'lláh in particular areas, or they want to remain as members of their existing religious community because of family pressures or they cannot accept certain of the Bahá'í teachings, can nevertheless participate in the Reflection Meetings and the programme of action. Also included in the consultations at the Reflection Meetings may be members of the elected Bahá'í institutions, the local spiritual assembly, and the members of the appointed arm of the administration

(Auxiliary Board members and their assistants), whose responsibilities focus on the encouragement and guidance of the community. These participants are able to feed in the learning from other localities as well as providing guidance on the best way forward.

The Reflection Meetings and the sequence of courses that is designed to enable people to consult and thus to participate in the Reflection Meetings appear adequately to take care of the problems associated with delivering simultaneously what James Fiskin regards as the three desirable but usually incompatible characteristics of a system of direct democracy – the Democratic Reform Trilemma:⁷

Participation – universal participation in the decision-making process by the people affected. This is achieved in the Bahá'í mechanism by motivating and giving people the skills in the sequence of courses to become involved in community action and giving them the confidence and skills to participate in the consultative process.

Deliberation – thoughtful and rational discussion where all major points of view are weighted according to evidence. This is achieved by training all members of the community in the sequence of course to engage meaningfully in the consultation process. The Bahá'í consultation process itself involves gathering the facts, then applying the relevant spiritual and moral principles to the subject under discussion and lastly formulating a plan.

Equality – all members of the population on whose behalf decisions are taken have an equal chance of having their views taken into account. This is again achieved through the consultation process where all are encouraged to put forward their opinions and these are then discussed without reference to the personalities of those who put forward the proposal. The sequence of courses is designed to empower the disempowered and enable them to take part in the process on an equal footing with others.

In a letter of 1 October 1969, the Universal House of Justice wrote that: "Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers" (MUHJ68-73 30). As a result of the developments of the last two decades in the Bahá'í world, we seem to be moving to a situation where the ultimate authority to set the framework of action of the Bahá'í community rests with the administrative institutions established through a system of representative democracy. But the immediate plans of action and day-to-day activities of the Bahá'í community and its wider community of interest proceed in accordance with a system of direct democracy at the Reflection Meeting. Thus the power to create the programmes of action that will carry forward these processes resides with the individual Bahá'ís who attend the Reflection Meeting and carry out the plans decided there. And both the decision making by the institutions of the representative democracy and the decision making in the Reflection Meetings is done through a consultative process, as is the interaction between the elected institutions and the community of Bahá'ís. Consultation is thus the oil that keeps the whole machine running and thus the quality of consultation is an important element in the success of the system.

The Bahá'í world is still at a very early stage in the development of this system of combined representative and direct democracy. The exact nature of the relationship between the Bahá'í institutions and the direct democracy of the Reflection Meetings has not yet been fully worked out. Questions such as: what happens when a Reflection Meeting takes a decision that the local assembly disapproves of? What will happen if the community of interest attending Reflection Meetings outnumber the Bahá'ís and start to take decisions that are against Bahá'í principles, such as taking off in a party political direction? Regarding such matters, the Universal House of Justice envisages the consultations that go on at the Reflection Meetings as a fluid, open, inclusive system where

experimentation and flexibility are encouraged as part of an ongoing learning process involving all individuals, communities, and institutions:

It should be remembered that the aim of such consultations, beyond addressing certain practical considerations, is to maintain a high level of enthusiasm and to create a spirit of service and fellowship among those present. Discussions should not become bogged down by undue concern for procedural issues, but should focus on what can be achieved and on the joy of witnessing the fruits of hard work and diligent effort.⁸

The Bahá'í programme would thus appear to be a very radical attempt to restructure society away from its present hierarchal, patriarchal, hegemonic form into a new form that is more egalitarian, allowing many who are currently powerless and cowed into silence to be empowered. In a way, this parallels a movement in the wider society that is also tending to bring down the hierarchical structures in society by bypassing them through social networking and electronic communications. This movement can be seen in the Arab Spring, the anti-globalization movement, and the spontaneous unorganized street revolts that are occurring in many countries where the people are protesting the actions of their government.

Neither the Bahá'í process or the street movements can be categorised in the old political framework of Left and Right Wing politics. They contain elements of both Left (in their move towards a more egalitarian society) and Right (in their desire to decentralize and empower the individual). The nearest analogy that can be drawn is in an example from the Internet. The old internet, the so-called Web 1.0, consisted of webpages where the flow of information was one-way – from the owner of the web-page to the viewer. This corresponds to the present political system with its hierarchy where orders come down to the masses, who have little control over what happens to them, partly as a result of the manipulation and control of

information by the hierarchy. Web 2.0 refers to pages where the content is created by the viewers – such sites as Wikipedia, blogs, Facebook, etc. With Web 2.0, the owner of the web-pages is only responsible for setting the subject and controlling excesses. This corresponds to the mechanism that Bahá'ís are creating, where everyone is encouraged to participate in community action and in the consultative decision-making process, while the authority for setting the agenda and controlling excesses rests with the local assembly.

Lastly, the question arises as to whether we can see all of this foreshadowed in the writings of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in the framework of a highly hierarchical, traditional society, for which the norms were completely different to those operating today. Furthermore, he needed to be diplomatic in what he wrote so that his words would not become a source of problems for the Bahá'í community by appearing to align them with elements in Iran who were advocating radical measures of reform and causing alarm to the government. However, one possible meaning of the following quotation could refer to the present developments in the Bahá'í Faith. This passage is from the *Lawḥ-i-Ittiḥád*, which has not yet been officially translated. In this tablet, Bahá'u'lláh describes six types of unity. A provisional translation of the first unity is:

Thou hast asked about unity (ittiḥád). The first kind of unity is unity in religion. This unity has always been the cause of the victory of the Faith of God in every age and century. Togetherness is the mystic sword of God.

For example, should a government see that most of the people of the country have rent asunder the veils and are turning towards the horizon of Divine revelation, it should remain silent and should listen to what is said. Each person who is attentive attains to the knowledge of God, except those who are utterly distant from the Mercy of God.⁹

When I first translated this tablet more than a decade ago, the way I had translated this passage was rejected by a number of Persian speakers. The issue was around the interpretation to be given to the words rendered above as “it [the government] should remain silent and listen to what is said (*sákit shavad va ánchih guftih shavad bishnavad*)”. They thought (and I later discovered that Mr Adib Taherzadeh when discussing this tablet summarizes this tablet in this way also) that this sentence should be read as though “what is said” means “what is said by the Divine Revelation” – that is to say that if the majority of a nation became Bahá’ís, then the government should be silent and pay heed to the words of the Bahá’í revelation. Or in the paraphrase of Mr Taherzadeh: “when the majority of the people in a country embrace His Cause, then the government will be able to put into practice His teachings and commandments.”¹⁰

Given the recent developments in the Bahá’í Faith described above, I now think that my original translation may well have been correct and that “what is said” refers to “what is said by the people”. In other words that once the people were following the path laid down by God, the government should allow the people to take control of their own affairs and should listen to what they say; in other words that they would be able to steer their own path and would need little control and direction from the centre.¹¹ If this second reading is correct, it points to the path that Shoghi Effendi indicated when he laid down the principle that the Bahá’í community should, as far as possible operate in a decentralised manner.¹² This is also the path that the Universal House of Justice has taken as it has gradually devolved responsibility for the creation and execution of expansion plans from the international level to the national level and increasingly to the local level, as the communities have matured and gained experience. It also points to the evolution of the Reflection Meeting where once the people in an area have had the necessary training through the sequence of courses and have understood the Bahá’í system of consultation, they can be

allowed to plan and execute programmes of action. In the words of the Universal House of Justice:

Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward.¹³

NOTES

- ¹ Asadu'lláh Işfahání, *Yád-dásht-há* (Photocopy of mss. Completed c. 1300/1882), p. 7; Rúḥu'lláh Mihrábkhání, "Maḥáfil-i Shawr dar `Ahd-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá," *Payám-i Bahá'í* no. 28 (Feb. 1982) 9-11; no. 29 (March 1982) 8-9. Strangely, Hájí Mírzá Ḥaydar `Alí Işfahání, although he describes this journey in his narrative, does not mention encouraging the Bahá'ís to set up these practices. It may be that this matter had less importance for Hájí Mírzá Ḥaydar `Alí than it did for Mírzá Asadu'lláh Işfahání. See *Bihjat us-Şudúr* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 2002), pp. 160-61).
- ² Vahid Rafati, *Payk-i Rástán* (Darmstadt: `Aşr-i Jadíd, 2005), p. 77.
- ³ `Abdu'l-`Alí `Alá'í, *Mu'assasih-yi Ayádí-yi Amru'lláh* (Tehran: Mu'assasih Maṭbú`át Millí Amrí, 130 B.E./1973), pp. 425-6.
- ⁴ Maḥmúd Zarfání, *Badáyi` al-Áthár* vol. 1 (2 vols., reprint, Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982), p. 67; trans. by Mohi Sobhani as *Maḥmúd's Diary* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), p. 76.
- ⁵ *Bahá'í News*, No. 46, November 1930, p. 2.
- ⁶ Youth can take part in the local Reflection meetings. The present definition of adult Bahá'ís as being those over 21 years of age was imposed by Shoghi Effendi in the 1920s for the sake of uniformity throughout the Bahá'í world because assembly incorporation would have been impossible if people under the age of 21, who in most countries at that time were regarded as minors, had been elected onto local assemblies. It seems likely that in due course, the age for being eligible to vote and be voted for will go down, perhaps in stages, to the age that Bahá'u'lláh has declared to be the age of maturity — fifteen (*Kitab-i-Aqdas*, Questions and Answers, question no 20). There is some question as to exactly what is meant by fifteen in this text. Since the Persian reckoning of the age of fifteen is

when someone enters the fifteenth year, which in most Western customary ways of reckoning age is the age of fourteen.

⁷ James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 2; and James Fiskin, “Deliberative Democracy and Constitutions”, in Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller Jr, and Jeffrey Paul (eds), *What Should Constitutions Do?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 248-260.

⁸ The Universal House of Justice quoted in International Teaching Centre, *Building Momentum*, section 3.3

⁹ *Ad'iyiyih-yi Hadrat-i Maḥbúb* (reprint Germany 1980), pp. 388-389.

¹⁰ Adib Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 4 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987), p. 191.

¹¹ When this paper was presented at the `Irfan Colloquium in Acuto in June 2013, Mr Ali Nakhjavani communicated to me his personal understanding of this passage. He believes that it refers to the situation when the Bahá'í Faith is a state religion and the majority of the people are Bahá'ís. At that time, Bahá'u'lláh is stating, in a diplomatic manner, that the government, which may not at this stage be composed of Bahá'ís, should listen to what the people are saying.

¹² Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 568, p. 172. See also *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 41-2.

¹³ Universal House of Justice, message addressed to the Bahá'ís of the World, Riqdán 2010.