



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

January 13, 2017

Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of . . .
. . . , Corresponding Secretary

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Thank you very much for your message of January 12, written on behalf of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of . . . in connection with the desire of some members of your Bahá'í community to participate in the upcoming Million Women March in Washington, D.C. on January 21, the day after the Presidential Inauguration.

As you may know, although protest is not our preferred response to controversial issues, the National Spiritual Assembly has indicated in the past that believers may take part in legal demonstrations and other public events in support of their views, provided that they do so as individuals and not in any way as representatives of the Faith. Additionally, they should be mindful of the difference between speaking out on an issue they believe in as a matter of justice, and taking partisan political stands.

In the instant case, the circumstances are extremely unusual, probably unprecedented. On the one hand, the stated purpose of the march, as described on its [website](#), is to “send a bold message to our new government on their first day in office, and to the world that women’s rights are human rights.” Later, on the same page of the website, a list of five Guiding Principles of the organizers is provided. They call for nonviolence, a reconciled world where justice prevails, attacking forces of evil instead of persons doing evil, accepting suffering without retaliation, and avoiding “internal violence of the spirit.” These are all principles to which we, as Bahá'ís, can readily agree. On the other hand, in the first line of the Mission Statement for the march, there is the following statement: “The rhetoric of the past election cycle has insulted, demonized, and threatened many of us – immigrants of all statuses, Muslims and those of diverse religious faiths, people who identify as LGBTQIA, Native people, Black and Brown people, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual assault – and our communities are hurting and scared.” Although the organizers have gone out of their way to avoid directly mentioning the President-elect, it is difficult to imagine how the reference to “the rhetoric of the past election cycle” could be interpreted as not being about the statements of the President-elect. Indeed, although the organizers are not asking for this, some participating in the march undoubtedly view it as a protest against the inauguration of Donald Trump rather than a march for women’s rights, especially given that it is taking place the day after the inauguration.

Thus, it is clear that different participants and different groups of participants will view the march and their participation in different ways. Any Baha'i participating in the march should bear this in mind, especially in light of the following statement of Shoghi Effendi:

"The Guardian wishes me to draw the attention of the friends through you that they should be very careful in their public utterance not to mention any political figures—either side with them or denounce them. This is the first thing to bear in mind. Otherwise they will involve the friends in political matters, which is infinitely dangerous for the Cause."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, January 12, 1933: *Bahá'í News*, No. 72, April 1933, p. 3)

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Thus, any Bahá'í planning to participate should be sure to be clear on his or her motive. If it is to protest the election and inauguration of Mr. Trump, he or she should withdraw from participating. If it is to support the rights of women, then participation is permissible provided that certain cautions are observed. As noted, different speakers and groups may approach the march very differently. If it appears that the march is turning from advocacy of women's rights to denouncing Mr. Trump, a Bahá'í would be obligated to withdraw. It is important to be alert and honest in making such an assessment.

On a related note, Bahá'ís should be extremely cautious about media interviews in these contexts, since mentioning to the media that one is a Bahá'í could result in him or her being mistaken for a representative of the Faith, and the things that he or she says could be inappropriately generalized or ascribed to the Bahá'í community as a whole. Even if this is not what is intended, it is important to bear in mind that the Bahá'í community is, at this point, still a small minority that is often not well understood, so we must take care not to create misunderstandings or misimpressions.

You may find that portions of the attached compilation are helpful in thinking further about this matter. For additional information about the public affairs policies of the National Spiritual Assembly, please visit the [U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs website](#), sign in using your Bahá'í credentials for Bahá'í-only pages and content, and click onto the "Resources" tab to find "Public Affairs Guidelines and Materials." You will find a link on that page to the "Public Affairs Policies and Guidelines 2012" document and several other materials that provide information about the Office of Public Affairs and the National Spiritual Assembly's policies on public affairs issues.

Thank you for contacting the Office of Public Affairs. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

. Communications Manager

Office of Public Affairs

National Spiritual Assembly of the
Bahá'ís of the United States