

References related to Involvement in Political Protests and Demonstrations

I feel it, therefore, incumbent upon me to stress, now that the time is ripe, the importance of an instruction which, at the present stage of the evolution of our Faith, should be increasingly emphasized, irrespective of its application to the East or to the West. And this principle is no other than that which involves the non-participation by the adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, whether in their individual capacities or collectively as local or national Assemblies, in any form of activity that might be interpreted, either directly or indirectly, as an interference in the political affairs of any particular government. Whether it be in the publications which they initiate and supervise; or in their official and public deliberations; or in the posts they occupy and the services they render; or in their dealings with men of eminence and authority; or in their affiliations with kindred societies and organizations, it is, I am firmly convinced, their first and sacred obligation to abstain from any word or deed that might be construed as a violation of this vital principle.

—Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 63, 64

Loyalty (to the) World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, security of its basic institutions, both imperatively demand all its avowed supporters ... in these days when sinister uncontrollable forces are deepening (the) cleavage sundering peoples, nations, creeds (and) classes, (to) resolve, despite (the) pressure (of) fast crystallizing public opinion, (to) abstain individually and collectively, in word (and) action, informally as well as in all official utterances and publications, from assigning blame, taking sides, however indirectly, in recurring political crises now agitating (and) ultimately engulfing human society. Grave apprehension lest cumulative effect (of) such compromises (should) disintegrate (the) fabric, clog (the) channel of grace that sustains (the) system of God's essentially supranational, supernatural order so laboriously evolved, so recently established.

—Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 56

The attitude of the Bahá'ís must be two-fold, complete obedience to the government of the country they reside in, and no interference whatsoever in political matters or questions. What the Master's statement really means is obedience to a duly constituted government, whatever that government may be in form. We are not the ones, as individual Bahá'ís, to judge our government as just or unjust – for each believer would be sure to hold a different viewpoint, and within our own Bahá'í fold a hotbed of dissension would spring up and destroy our unity.

We must build up our own Bahá'í system, and leave the faulty systems of the world to go their way. We cannot change them through becoming involved in them; on the contrary, they will destroy us.

—Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 56

There is one fundamental point which Shoghi Effendi wishes me to emphasize. By the principle of non-interference in political matters we should not mean that only corrupt politics and partial and sectarian politics are to be avoided. But that any pronouncement on any current system of politics connected with any government must be shunned. We should not only take side with no political party, group or system actually in use, but we should also refuse to commit ourselves to any statement which may be interpreted as being sympathetic or antagonistic to any existing political organization or philosophy. The attitude of the Bahá'ís must be one of complete aloofness. They are neither for nor against any system of politics. Not that they are the ill-wishers of their respective governments but that due to certain basic considerations arising out of their teachings and of the administrative machinery of their Faith, they prefer not to get entangled in political affairs and to be misinterpreted and misunderstood by their countrymen.

In the light of this principle, it becomes clear that to contribute articles on current political affairs to any newspaper must inevitably lead the writer to express, directly or in an indirect manner, his view and his criticisms on the subject. He is, in addition, always liable to be misinterpreted and misunderstood by the politicians. The best thing to do, therefore, is simply not to write on current politics at all.

—From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated March 2, 1934;
cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference Library*, 4th ed., p. 452

He does not see any objection to Bahá'í students taking part as Bahá'ís in a protest such as that mentioned in the clipping. On the contrary, he does not see how they could remain indifferent when fellow students were voicing our own Bahá'í attitude on such a vital issue and one we feel so strongly about.

He thinks that the quotation you cite from “The Advent of Divine Justice” would certainly indicate that such a protest was justifiable. As there was nothing political about it, there was no reason for the Bahá’í students not to participate.

—From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to
Mr. Ellsworth Blackwell, dated January 4, 1948

In connection with the subject matter of Mr. Blackwell’s letter and your reference to it, the Guardian feels that, as he said in his letter to Mr. Blackwell, there was no objection at all to the students taking part in something so obviously akin to the spirit of our teachings as a campus demonstration against race prejudice. The Bahá’ís did not inaugurate this protest, they merely were proud to have a voice as Bahá’ís in such a protest, took part, and he thinks they did quite right and violated no administrative principle.

—From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the
National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada,
dated November 18, 1948;
cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference Library*, 4th ed., p. 531

Regarding your question: the Guardian does not see how Bahá’í participation with other organizations and religious bodies, in a non-political meeting to promote civic unity and welfare along some line, can be considered political. Much as the friends must guard against in any way ever seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings – such as, for instance, better race relations.

—From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to
Mr. Ellsworth Blackwell, dated November 21, 1948

It is often through our misguided feeling that we can somehow aid our fellows better by some activity outside the Faith, that Bahá’ís are led to indulge in politics. This is a dangerous delusion. As Shoghi Effendi’s secretary wrote on his behalf: “What we Bahá’ís must face is the fact that society is disintegrating so rapidly that moral issues which were clear a half century ago are now hopelessly confused and, what is more, thoroughly mixed up with battling political interests. That is why the Bahá’ís must turn all their forces into the channel of building up the Bahá’í Cause and its administration. They can neither change nor help the world in any other way at present. If they become involved in the issues the governments of the world are

struggling over, they will be lost. But if they build up the Bahá'í pattern they can offer it as a remedy when all else has failed. (Bahá'í News No. 241, March 1951, p. 14) "...We must build up our Bahá'í system, and leave the faulty systems of the world to go their way. We cannot change them through becoming involved in them; on the contrary, they will destroy us." (Bahá'í News No. 215, January 1949, p. 1)

—From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, dated December 8, 1967;
cited in *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 135

Civil disobedience is not permissible for Bahá'ís. However, a Bahá'í may decide, while obeying a repugnant regulation, to complain to the authorities, if wisdom and consultation with Bahá'í institutions dictate such action.

In conclusion, a Bahá'í should be implicitly obedient to the constituted authority in the community wherein he functions. Thus, for example, if school administrators are permitted by the state to promulgate rules and regulations for student conduct, the Bahá'í student will obey those rules. He may take part in action to correct such rules only by conduct which does not violate any Bahá'í principle or any law or regulation including the rule itself. Where a state or local government or agency enforces an unjust law, or unjustly enforces any law, the Bahá'í within the jurisdiction will not attempt to demonstrate the invalidity of the law by violating it, nor will he violate any second law in protest against the first.

—From the article "Obedience to Civil Authority
in the *National Bahá'í Review*, August 1970

The principle of non-involvement in politics implies that Bahá'ís do not allow themselves to be drawn into the struggles and conflicting interests which divide the many factions and groups of their fellowmen. This principle is clearly enunciated by the Guardian on pages 64 to 67 of "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh" in the passage beginning:

"Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions. In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that worldwide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster...."

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated March 31, 1982

In reply to your letter of 19 March 1985 asking whether the friends should participate in demonstrations and protest activities sponsored by an active anti-apartheid group in Bermuda, the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to convey the following.

Revulsion against the segregation of races, particularly as it is practiced in South Africa, is increasing, and the House of Justice appreciates that the friends in Bermuda are much affected by feelings of wanting to show how objectionable racial prejudice is to them. However, as apartheid is identified with the South African Government, the participation of Bahá'ís in the demonstrations and protest activities of the anti-apartheid group could be construed as opposition to the South African Government, which would be tantamount to involvement in politics. On the other hand, Bahá'ís could, and indeed should, support groups advocating the abolition of all racial prejudices.

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated April 16, 1985

In reply to your letter of 15 July 1985, seeking further clarification on the issue of apartheid, the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to point out that as the policy of apartheid derives from racial discrimination, it cannot be accepted by Bahá'ís wherever, and in whatever form, it may be practiced.

While the friends should, of course, support the principles of the Faith, including those advocating the oneness of mankind, and may associate with groups and engage in activities which promote these principles, they must scrupulously take care not to become involved in political issues. As stated in the letter to you dated 16 April 1985, participation in anti-apartheid demonstrations and protest activities could be construed as involvement in politics, and therefore should be avoided.

In your current letter you ask what is the difference between Bahá'í appeals to various governments about the persecutions of the friends in Iran and similar appeals about apartheid. While we have indeed sought support from governments of the free world on behalf of our Faith, we have never called for political demonstrations to bring pressure to bear on governments. As Bahá'ís, we are occupied in obeying the commands of the Manifestation of God to build up the Bahá'í Administrative Order and to diffuse His Message throughout the world. In doing this, we will use every legal method available to us to obtain recognition for the Faith, to acquire legal rights for the operation of our institutions and the application of our laws,

and to obtain redress for persecution of Bahá'ís. We will not, however, attempt to obtain legislation to compel non-Bahá'ís to obey Bahá'í laws and principles, nor will we ever engage in subversive activities or advocate rebellion. The world around us is seething with unrest caused by conflicting interests of governments, peoples, races and individuals. Each of these contending parties has some good and some evil on its side, and, whereas we will unhesitatingly uphold Bahá'í principles, we will never become embroiled in these internecine conflicts by identifying ourselves with one or other of the parties, however much in our hearts we may sympathize with its aims.

The positive attitude to the question of racial prejudice is radiant and wholehearted exemplification of the principle of the oneness of mankind, first among the members of your National Spiritual Assembly and then throughout the Bahá'í community...

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated August 18, 1985

In view of the necessity of the Bahá'í community to relate to governments, whether for reasons of defending its persecuted members or of responding to opportunities to be of service, a correct understanding of what is legitimate Bahá'í action in the face of the policy of non-interference with government affairs is bound to be difficult to achieve on the part of individual friends. The force of circumstances, operating internally and externally, is pressing the Bahá'í community into certain relationships with governments. Hence, it is important that decisions as to the conduct of such relationships be made by authorized institutions of the Faith and not by individuals. In matters of this kind, given the utter complexity of human affairs with which the Bahá'í community must increasingly cope both spiritually and practically, individual judgment is not sufficient.

...In any such situation the National Spiritual Assembly must weigh carefully the consequences, pro and con, of any contemplated action and carry out its decision, preferably with the fore-knowledge and consent of the House of Justice. The friends must learn to appreciate this new situation, to acquiesce to the prerogative of their elected institutions to decide on questions involving or affecting relations with their governments, and evince confidence in the incontrovertible promise of Bahá'u'lláh to protect His community.

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated June 23, 1987

The Bahá'í principles...do not permit or encourage Bahá'ís to be confrontational or to participate in partisan politics. Civil disobedience, even though non-violent, diverges from the Bahá'í principles of consultation and obedience to political authority.

—From a letter written on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly,
dated October 26, 1987

Generally, the wisest course for the Bahá'í community in controversial situations is to remain uninvolved; however, at times when primary Bahá'í principles are at the heart of an issue, the decision of the National Assembly concerned should not necessarily be to observe silence but, rather, to take action which rises above the partisan political manifestations of the controversy. The Assembly may, for instance, present its own statement to the authorities, setting forth its views on essential issues on the basis of principle, letting the circumstances determine how the principle is best to be applied. If you feel that such action would be appropriate in the situation you face with respect to the issues raised in your letter, you may wish to draft such a statement, but before releasing it, kindly check with the World Centre.

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated January 14, 1988

The Bahá'í community of Iran was hardly in a position to protest in its own behalf in response to the persecution against it. The friends there have never enjoyed any standing in the eyes of the Government of Iran, not even during the time of the Shah, and have always been a persecuted minority. On the broader question, how can the Bahá'í community devote its limited time to protesting the myriad cases of human rights abuses in the world when it knows full well that the basic solution to all problems facing society depends on the extent to which the Bahá'í Faith and its Teachings are spread throughout the world? It is not that the Bahá'ís are unconcerned about human rights violations, but rather, that priority must be given to establishing the means through which problems deeply seated in the disunity of the human race can be resolved. Only the Cause of God can do this.

There are many organizations that have devoted themselves to protesting against human rights violations, and in many instances individual Bahá'ís are among those supporting such organizations. Given the relatively small size of the Bahá'í community throughout the world, and the fact that in a great many places the Bahá'ís are themselves not yet fully knowledgeable of the Teachings, it is not possible at this stage for them to assail all the evils afflicting humanity,

but must, of necessity, take the time to internalize the principles of the Faith and expand its numbers to a degree that it can influence a profound change in the behavior of world society.

A point to bear in mind is that as laudable as may be the desire to join in protests against human rights violations, in many instances, the direct involvement of Bahá'ís in such activities would draw them into political entanglements which would be detrimental to the Cause of God. This is why the principle of association but not affiliation must be upheld as regards organizations such as Amnesty International.

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated December 2, 1992

Thirty years ago some 250,000 people of all races converged on Washington, D.C. in a massive demonstration for "Jobs, Justice, and Freedom." ...

On August 28 this year people from all over the country will once more march on the nation's capital to take up Dr. King's call for racial justice and harmony.

The National Spiritual Assembly encourages Bahá'ís to join in efforts to support this year's 30th anniversary March and to promote the principles of race unity and the oneness of humanity....

Because of the opportunities the March provides for Bahá'ís to come into contact with members of many different organizations and faiths, all those who travel to Washington are being asked to report to the National Teaching Committee so that they may be counted toward the Three Year Plan goal for traveling teaching.

—From a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly to
all Local Spiritual Assemblies and Registered Groups,
dated July 23, 1993

Your Spiritual Assembly's sense that Bahá'ís should exercise extreme caution in any active involvement in demonstrations is correct. Although there is no prohibition against individual Bahá'ís joining in marches and demonstrations as long as they are legal, nonviolent, and politically nonpartisan, one would hope that individuals would be guided by their Bahá'í principles when considering the implications of their participation in this type of activity. In the case that you mention in your letter, the overarching principle is that the Bahá'í Faith does not

take sides in conflicts between countries, and participating in a march or demonstration for or against military action in another country presupposes taking sides.

—From a letter written by the Office of External Affairs,
dated January 3, 2003

As you are aware, it is not the practice of Bahá'í institutions or individuals to take positions on the political decisions of governments. One of the greatest obstacles to progress is the tendency of Bahá'ís to be drawn into the general attitudes and disputes that surround them. The central importance of the principle of avoidance of politics and controversial matters is that Bahá'ís should not allow themselves to be involved in the disputes of the many conflicting elements of the society around them.

The aim of the Bahá'ís is to reconcile viewpoints, to heal divisions, and to bring about tolerance and mutual respect among men, and this aim is undermined if we allow ourselves to be swept along by the ephemeral passions of others. This does not mean that Bahá'ís cannot collaborate with any non-Bahá'í movement; it does mean that good judgment is required to distinguish those activities and associations which are beneficial and constructive from those which are divisive.

—From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice,
dated January 12, 2003

We would like to take this opportunity to review the guidance provided by the House of Justice in connection with a similar global day of action organized last year, should you be approached or inclined to participate in an event in your city.

As you are aware, Bahá'ís do not engage in partisan political activities. In this respect, in a message to the believers in Iran dated 31 October 2008, the House of Justice elaborated on the implications of this fundamental principle of the Faith as follows:

You should take every opportunity to explain to your fellow citizens the fundamental principle of the Faith that strictly prohibits involvement in partisan political activity of any kind, whether local, national or international. Baha'is view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of human society, and obedience to the laws of the land is a distinguishing feature of their beliefs. Iran is dear to the Bahai's, who are the well-wishers of all. In whatever country they reside, including the birthplace of Baha'u'llah, they strive to promote

the welfare of society. They are enjoined to work alongside their compatriots in fostering fellowship and unity and in establishing peace and justice. They seek to uphold their own rights, as well as the rights of others, through whatever legal means are available to them, conducting themselves at all times with honesty and integrity. They eschew conflict and dissension. They avoid contest for worldly power. Neither do they aspire to overthrow governments, nor do they participate in the schemings of others to do so. The record of the past one hundred and sixty years bears witness to this assertion.

The organizers of the Global Day of Action have explicitly asserted that this undertaking is non-partisan in nature and that its aim is to call upon the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to uphold internationally recognized human rights and the related guarantees that are enshrined in the country's constitution. Accordingly, Bahá'ís may generally feel free to lend their support to this event by participating in it as individuals. Should they be invited to sign related petitions, they may also do so, provided the wording is non-partisan in character. Indeed, initiatives such as this afford a welcome opportunity for Bahá'ís to demonstrate their willingness to engage with likeminded organizations and individuals in defending the human rights of all who suffer oppression and in championing the cause of justice.

Believers who choose to participate in this and other such demonstrations should, however, be sensitive to the fact that in certain countries and in particular situations the event could assume a partisan political character, notwithstanding the original intent of the organizers. In such a circumstance, believers would of course not participate or, if the event assumes such a character after it has begun, should tactfully withdraw.

Should questions arise in relation to your participation in events in your city, we ask that you turn to your Local Spiritual Assembly and follow its guidance. Local Spiritual Assemblies may, in turn, seek guidance from the Office of External Affairs.

—From a letter from the National Spiritual Assembly to the
American Bahá'í Community, dated May 27, 2010