

circumstances, as when an equal number of ballots have been cast in an election, or where the qualifications for any office are balanced as between the various races, faiths or nationalities within the community, priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community."

(Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 35)

There is of course a general attitude inculcated in this statement that minorities should be encouraged. But the tricky part is often when getting into the details. The details are valuable, not only in and of themselves, but for providing clarity on the lengths to which that attitude should generally be manifested, so let's look at the detail of this statement that minorities are to possess a privilege that if there is a tie vote, they will win that vote.

We could note (as many on the Right may appreciate) that this is only in the case of tie votes. In Bahá'í elections at least, there is not to be any set of rigid quotas about electing minorities. For election to Bahá'í institutions, this occurs only in the case of a tie vote.

And something else those inclined to the Right might appreciate can be found in the continuation from the above quotation:

"In the light of this principle, and bearing in mind the extreme desirability of having the minority elements participate and share responsibility in the conduct of Bahá'í activity, it should be the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible."

(*ibid*, pp. 35-36)

So, on the one hand, this statement does continue to indicate that as many of the minority elements as possible will ideally be represented in the community. But again, we need to look closely at the details. In this goal for wider diversity, the passage doesn't suggest that the community should just elect or appoint minorities without discernment. It says, "in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements".

This intent of those being elected fulfilling requirements is, I think, well amplified in this quotation:

"...[O]ne of the fundamental principles of our administrative order...is freedom of choice--freedom of electors to elect anyone they please to Local or National bodies, and freedom of the members of these bodies to appoint any Bahá'í, who seems best qualified for the work, to function on Committees."

"The first consideration must always be the person best qualified for a

job...."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, June 16, 1947: Bahá'í News, No. 198, August 1947, p. 3, in Lights of Guidance, no. 543)

Note in particular the last sentence. This is a point argued frequently by those on the Right (some of whose most ardent champions, it might be mentioned, are minorities themselves), that it is critical for institutions to always seek out the person best qualified, particularly for high impact work. Note that the case of a tie-breaking vote does not impinge on this need to find the best candidate. It is only to take effect when there is a tie vote.

If one is not yet convinced that the qualifications are to rise above concerns of diversity, I think the following quotation on the delicacy of choosing a representative when Bahá'í women were first given the vote in India and Burma may be instructive (the vote having previously been restricted due to the lack of readiness for women being given the right to vote there at that time⁶):

"Regarding the position of the Bahá'í women in India and Burma, and their future collaboration with the men in the administrative work of the Cause, I feel that the time is now ripe that those women who have already conformed to the prevailing custom in India and Burma by discarding the veil should not only be given the right to vote for the election of their local and national representatives, but should themselves be eligible to the membership of all Bahá'í Assemblies throughout India and Burma, be they local or national.

"This definite and most important step, however, should be taken with the greatest care and caution, prudence and thoughtfulness. Due regard must be paid to their actual capacity and present attainments, and only those who are best qualified for membership, be they men or women, and irrespective of social standing, should be elected to the extremely responsible position of a member of the Bahá'í Assembly."

(Shoghi Effendi, Dawn of a New Day, December 27, 1923, pp. 3-4)

So, emphasis is made on their "actual capacity and present attainments" and "only those who are best qualified for membership" should be elected to such an "extremely responsible position" as that of a Bahá'í Assembly member.

(This is not to suggest that minorities (or women) will inevitably be of only equal or lesser capacity. Those in a given community may in fact exceed the majority in capacity. But the point I'm making here is that a concern for diversity is not to trump capacity in importance.)

Shoghi Effendi then goes on to indicate the responsibilities those women have in proving their capacity through greater study and participation (an encouragement he has also given to people of color⁷), pointing to their own agency in enhancing their credentials (a development which might lead to their capacity for future election):

"This momentous decision, I trust, will prove to be a great incentive to the

women Bahá'ís throughout India and Burma who, I hope, will now bestir themselves and endeavour to the best of their ability to acquire a better and more profound knowledge of the Cause, to take a more active and systematic part in the general affairs of the Movement, and prove themselves in every way enlightened, responsible and efficient co-workers to their fellow-men in their common task for the advancement of the Cause throughout their country."

(ibid., p. 4)

At this point, some on the Left might feel disheartened. There is the tie vote binding on Bahá'ís, but this might not feel like an adequate remedy.

Here is where the Bahá'í Writings go further and transcend compulsory remedies (remedies which incidentally may in less enlightened circles breed resentment or distrust as to the capacity of those elected). The Bahá'í Writings call on individuals within the majority to consider it a spiritual duty to enhance the diversity of the community, not merely through waiting on tie-breaking votes, but in giving their own personal due consideration as to whether they can enhance the racial and ethnic diversity of the community (as well as its gender and age diversity).

"From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender."

(Universal House of Justice, at https://bahai-library.com/uhj_bahai_electoral_process)

This need was also implied in the quotation already cited, "it should be the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that ... Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as possible." (I've omitted the portion here about them having the necessary qualifications in order to emphasize the other point that the community should indeed, as its next concern, strive to increase its diversity.)

While some in the majority (e.g., whites) might not end up fulfilling this duty, many others who learn this teaching will be forced to reflect and see whether and how it is possible to fulfill their obligation to enhance diversity.

To summarize:

1. The first consideration should be the person best qualified is the one chosen.
2. As an institutional encouragement for diversity, in the case of a tie vote, the minority should, however, be accorded priority.
3. As an individual encouragement for diversity, the voters (and institutional members responsible for selecting appointees) should consider it their personal

obligation to think of enhancing diversity.

As with many Bahá'í remedies, the answer is nuanced⁸, with a partial focus on compulsion, yes, but mostly focused on encouraging a new voluntary attitude—one which unequivocally calls for the active welcoming of diversity by both individuals and institutions.

Footnotes

The Bahá'í Writings, however, did seem to suggest in 1938 that the wider world was not going to be very inclined to permanently encourage diversity:

"Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it."

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 35)

"Let the white make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem...to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions..."

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 40)

See, for example, Bahai⁹ on the Need to teach the Faith to minorities.

"The Summer Schools provide a splendid setting and environment to which the best element among the coloured race should be specially attracted. Through such association prejudice can be gradually eradicated, and `Abdu'l-Bahá's ardent wish fully realized.

"The Guardian finds it impossible to overestimate the importance and urgency of this sacred duty that confronts both the Local and the National Assemblies."

(From a letter dated 28 July 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada)

As with the case of administrative privilege, there can be a patronizing tendency among guilt-afflicted whites that the call for diversity somehow requires them to platform any people of color without regard to their individual characteristics, no matter how aggrieved or immoral the individual may be, with the potentially condescending implication that there must be no other people of color of higher character who can be appealed to. The fact that the above quotation speaks to the need to attract the "best element among the coloured race" suggests that such misguided thinking needs correction. Such a statement does not of course mean that there does not exist also elements of lesser moral quality in the white race as well, but with the majority of

Bahá'ís in administrative positions of the time being white, there was need for such a framing. For one scholar's take on the phenomenon of modern-day white condescension, see McWhorter, J. H. (2021). *Woke racism: How a new religion has betrayed Black America*. Portfolio/Penguin Random House.

Please note that the reference to "Right" and "Left" in this article is in a U.S. context, and points here to the basic ideological leanings to which sincere people subscribe in the country's current prominent intellectual divide, and not to specific politicians or parties. The grouping can also be an over-simplification of the actual beliefs held by various people who consider themselves to be on one side or the other.

In accordance with the readiness of the times, the right for Bahá'í women to vote and be elected to office was applied after some movement had already been made in the country as a whole in the direction of women's suffrage, but before the country had been ready to fully accept it. This trend was also the case in the United States where several states had already given women the right to vote but not yet the whole country.

"As we neither feel nor acknowledge any distinction between the duties and privileges of a Bahá'í, whoever he may be, it is incumbent upon the Negro believers to rise above this great test which the attitude of some of their white brethren may present. They must prove their innate equality not by words but by deeds. They must accept the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh for the sake of the Cause, love it, and cling to it, and teach it, and fight for it as their own Cause, forgetful of the shortcomings of others. Any other attitude is unworthy of their faith.

"Proud and happy in the praises which even Bahá'u'lláh Himself has bestowed upon them, they must feel He revealed Himself for them and every other down-trodden race, loves them, and will help them to attain their destiny."

(On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 2/9/42, in a compilation, "The Experience, Spiritual Qualities, Obligations and Destiny of Black People," p. 6, #15, prepared by the Research Department of The Universal House of Justice, 1993, in *Pupil of the Eye*, no. 44 and *Power of Unity*, no. 44)

The Bahá'í teachings on economics, for example, similarly call for some compulsory redistribution (through progressive taxation), but they reject extremes of wholesale redistribution and also emphasize voluntary solutions (including a spiritually obligatory but non-enforced tithing obligation (called *Huqúqu'lláh*) to contribute to a Fund used in part for the poor).

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