



## MAḤFEL-E RUḤĀNI

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**MAḤFEL-E RUḤĀNI** (spiritual assembly), current designation of the Bahai governing councils elected at local and national level.

*History.* In the *Ketāb-e aqdas*, Bahā'-Allāh instructs that in each locality there should be established a House of Justice (*Bayt-al-'Adl*), where nine or more Bahais should gather for the purpose of consulting about the affairs of the Bahais in that area (v. 31). As a result of this, an "Assembly of Consultation" (*maḥfel-e šawr*) was set up in a number of towns and villages in Iran in the 1870s (Eṣfahāni; Mehrābkāni). Bahā'-Allāh stated, however, that the time was not yet right for such developments (ILMA 28, pp. 179-80). These early efforts did not survive long, however. In the years immediately after the passing of Bahā'-Allāh in 1892, an assembly was established by the Hands of the Cause (*ayādi-e amr Allāh*) in Tehran in an attempt to heal the disunity being created by Jamāl Borujerdi, a leading Bahai who later came out in open opposition to 'Abd-al-Bahā', but he refused to co-operate (Fāẓel Māzandarāni, 1974, pp. 385-87).

In 1897, 'Abd-al-Bahā' appears to have given instructions to [Ebn Abhar](#) that, on his return to Tehran, he should establish an assembly of consultation (*majma'a-ye šawr*) there. This assembly consisted of the four individuals that Bahā'-Allāh had appointed as Hands of the Cause and seven others chosen by the Hands. A notable feature of this assembly was the presence on it of Bahais from minority backgrounds, one convert from Judaism, and one from Zoroastrianism. From this time onwards, prominent Bahais such as Ebn Abhar, as they traveled about Iran, would set up these assemblies in every



town and village where there were sufficient Bahais to do so (Sefidvaš, 1976, p. 55).

At first these assemblies were called assemblies of consultation (*majma'a* or *majles-e šawr*, in America “boards of counsel”), then in a few places such as Chicago, they were called a “house of justice” (*bayt-al-'adl*). In 1902-3, 'Abd-al-Bahā' sent messages to all parts of the Bahai world that henceforth, in order to allay any fears that these assemblies were competing with the executive or judiciary functions of the government, all of these bodies were for the time being to be called *maḥfel-e ruḥāni* (spiritual assembly; Abdul-Baha 1909, p. 6; Stockman, pp. 67-73). Although in North America assemblies were elected from the start, in Iran, this did not occur until 1913. When Shoghi Effendi took over the leadership of the Bahai Faith in 1921, he immediately began a process of getting as many local assemblies elected as possible and standardizing their election procedures, membership, and functions (Shoghi Effendi, 1968, p. 37).

In most countries with substantial Bahai communities, some form of national co-ordinating body was set up, often on 'Abd-al-Bahā's instructions. In Iran, for example, the Tehran Spiritual Assembly acted as a Central Spiritual Assembly for the whole country, in the United States, the Temple Unity set up to build the house of worship (*mašreq al-aḍkār*) also acted as a national co-ordinating body. It was, however, 'Abd-al-Bahā's Will and Testament, with its provision for the establishment of “secondary Houses of Justice” prior to the election of the Universal House of Justice ('Abdu'l-Bahā', 1991, p. 14) that led Shoghi Effendi to instruct that National Spiritual Assemblies should be set up on a uniform basis throughout the Bahai world from 1923 onwards. At first, one assembly might cover more than one country in a region, until the Bahai communities in that region grew to the point that they were able to elect individual national spiritual assemblies. Conversely some countries such as the United States are split into more than one national spiritual assembly (Hawaii, Alaska, and the Continental United States).

The Declaration of Trust and By-Laws, which were registered for the incorporation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States in 1927 and the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of New York City in 1931, were drawn up in consultation with Shoghi Effendi and then became the template for all subsequent incorporations of local and national bodies throughout the Bahai world in those places where it has been possible to achieve such legal recognition (Shoghi Effendi, p. 335). These documents define the purpose, authority, powers, and functions of these bodies, as well as the manner of



their election and proceedings and their relationship both to each other and, once it was established later, to the Universal House of Justice (*Bahā'ī World*, 1956, pp. 393-400, 435-38). The Bahai community thus has at present a fairly uniform, coordinated global administrative structure.

*Nature and functions.* The spiritual assembly is the institution that has the highest level of authority in the area for which it is responsible. Its mandate is given in the above-mentioned passages of Bahai scripture and it is therefore considered a sacred institution. It is, however, primarily an administrative body and has no ritual or sacerdotal functions. The spiritual assembly, whether local or national, consists of nine persons elected to carry out this function for one year. The boundaries of each assembly usually correspond to those of the relevant governmental authorities. Spiritual assemblies are the main administrative organs of the Bahai community. As such, they function alongside a structure of appointed individuals, counsellors (*mošāverin*) and members of the Auxiliary Board (*hay'at-e mo'āvanat*), whose function is to guide and advise the spiritual assemblies and individual Bahais.

The spiritual assembly plans and coordinates the activities of the Bahai community in its area, including the commemoration of Bahai holy days, the arranging of Bahai meetings, establishing children and youth classes, pastoral care of the Bahai community, planning activities for the promotion and spread of the Bahai faith, protecting the Bahai faith from attacks, administering Bahai funds and properties in its area, establishing projects aimed at the social and economic development of the area, providing humanitarian assistance where necessary, reviewing and publishing Bahai literature, arbitrating and settling disputes within the Bahai community, and representing the Bahai community in dealings with the relevant local and national government. The members of these assemblies are called upon to have regard for the interests of the whole community and indeed for the people of the world in the decisions they make, not narrow parochial concerns. They are enjoined not to be aloof but to be in close contact with the generality of the community and to maintain moral rectitude. The Bahai funds that support the work of the assemblies are collected by voluntary donations from Bahais only (National Spiritual Assembly, 1976, pp. 47-50, 75; *Bahā'ī World*, 1956, pp. 393-400, 435-8; Universal House of Justice, 1991, II, pp. 39-60, 83-136; Dehqān, 1999, pp. 68-77; Momen, 2006, pp. 111-12).

*Procedures.* Each assembly, whether local or national, elects a chair, a vice-chair, a secretary, and a treasurer. Decisions are made by consensus or



majority vote following a free-ranging but non-adversarial consultative process, which is based on Bahai principles and teachings (Universal House of Justice, 1991, I, pp. 93-110; Dehqān, pp. 171-73; Momen pp. 117-20). If individual Bahais feel that a local assembly has erred, they are free to request the assembly to reconsider its decision and then to appeal this decision to the national assembly and Universal House of Justice if necessary. Neither membership of an assembly nor the fact of being an elected officer of the assembly bestows any power, authority, or spiritual rank on an individual Bahai. It is only the assembly acting as an institution that has authority. The function of the chair is only to ensure orderly consultation and make certain that all participate; there is no casting vote. Once a decision has been made, all members of the assembly are obliged to work for the implementation of this, even if they voted against it. Local assemblies usually communicate and consult with the members of their community at the Nineteen-Day Feast (*Ẓiāfat-e nuzdah-ruza*). Many local and most national assemblies appoint committees to carry out some of their functions (Dehqān, pp. 127-39). Many of these details of the functioning of spiritual assemblies are merely current practice and are not fixed. They may be changed in the future by the Universal House of Justice (*Bahā'ī World*, 1956, pp. 397-98).

*Bahai elections.* Bahai elections have a number of unusual features. There are no nominations, no candidates, no parties, and no electioneering. At the present, elections occur annually on the first day of Rezvān (Declaration of Bahā'-Allāh; 21 April) for local assemblies and sometime during the remaining days of the twelve-day Rezvān festival for the national assemblies (except in years that the Universal House of Justice is being elected, when the national elections are delayed). Any Bahai twenty-one years of age or over in good standing and resident in the area of jurisdiction of an assembly is eligible to vote and to be elected to membership of that assembly. Voters write down the names of the nine people whom they consider best suited to serve on these bodies. The nine persons gaining the largest number of votes are elected to the local assembly. Preference is given to individuals who are from a minority background if there is a tied vote for the last place. The Bahais in each area also elect delegates to a national convention, where the national assembly is elected using the same election procedure (National Spiritual Assembly, pp. 63-65; Universal House of Justice, 1991, I, pp. 315-18; Abizadeh; Momen, pp. 115-17).

*Present and future development.* There was a gradual increase in the numbers



of both local and national spiritual assemblies in the period 1930-50. By 1954, the number of national spiritual assemblies stood at 12 and local ones at 708 (*Bahā'ī World*, 1956, pp. 721-74). There was then a period of dramatic growth in these numbers, rising to 149 national assemblies and 19,486 local assemblies in 1988 (Smith and Momen, 1989, p. 70).

The rapid growth in the 1960s and 1970s led to problems in that, in many places, local assemblies were recorded just because there were nine or more Bahais in that locality. Many of these converts were, however, illiterate and poorly informed about the Bahai faith, and so many of these assemblies never functioned. It often required a visit from an outside Bahai even to set up the annual election of the assembly, and often there were no further meetings during the year. For a period of time, the rules were relaxed to allow new local assemblies to be formed at any time during the year (from 1972), and existing local assemblies could be formed on any of the twelve days of the Bahai festival of Režvān (from 1977; Universal House of Justice, 1996, pp. 218-19, 360). This relaxation of the rules was ended in 1997 (Universal House of Justice, 2009, p. 462), which led to a smaller but more realistic number of local assemblies; 10,344 in 2003. The number of national spiritual assemblies has risen gradually, reaching 179 in 2003 (*Bahā'ī World*, 2004, p. 279).

At present, spiritual assemblies are working to establish their role in the new structure and functioning of the Bahai community that the Universal House of Justice inaugurated from 1996 onwards. This involves individual Bahais taking greater responsibility and initiative in the activities that occur in each area, as well as in the establishment of reflection meetings where members of one or more communities gather to make plans for forthcoming community activities. The emergence of these new factors in Bahai community life has led to a need for a readjustment in the role of the local assembly in directing local Bahai affairs, which is an area where further developments are likely (Universal House of Justice, 2006, pp. 400-2). It is anticipated that, as Bahai communities grow, spiritual assemblies will take on a wider range of functions, including increasing involvement with the discourse of society and the social and economic development of the area under their jurisdiction. Thus it is envisaged that the role and functions of spiritual assemblies will develop organically. Shoghi Effendi (1968, p. 20; idem, 1991, p. 6) states that, at some future date, the “spiritual assemblies” will evolve into and take on the designation given them by Bahā'-Allāh and 'Abd-al-Bahā', the “houses of justice”.



In Iran, the Tehran assembly of consultation evolved into the Central Spiritual Assembly (*maḥfel-e markazi-e ruḥāni*), and then in 1934 into the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Iran. This body continued until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when it was disbanded by government order and the nine members of it were arrested and disappeared without trace in August 1980. They are assumed to have been secretly executed by the government. The missing assembly members were replaced, but eight members of this replacement assembly were arrested and executed in December 1981. In these early years of the revolution, many members of local spiritual assemblies throughout Iran were also arrested and executed, including most of the members of the assemblies of Tabriz, Hamadān, and Yazd. In August 1983, all Bahai institutions, local and national, were banned by the government and immediately disbanded.

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