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## **Governance, Democracy, and Social Change: A Bahá'í Perspective**

### Abstract:

Since the time of its birth in the nineteenth-century Persian and Ottoman Empires, the Bahá'í community has emerged as a world-wide community comprising a microcosm of the planet's diverse human population. It has a steadily growing membership that has surpassed five million people, drawn from over 2000 different indigenous tribes, races, and ethnic groups, representing all nations and socio-economic classes on earth. The Bahá'í Faith is now widely recognized as an independent world religion, yet it has no ecclesiastical order or clergy of any kind. Instead, the community is organized through a system of locally elected governing assemblies in over 10,000 localities worldwide, nationally elected governing assemblies in 179 independent nations and territories, and a single internationally elected governing body, located in Haifa, Israel, that coordinates the community's activities on a global scale. It is, by these measures, one of the most diverse, globally distributed, democratically organized communities of people – religious or otherwise – on the planet today.

This presentation will explore the unique system of governance that the Bahá'í community is currently constructing, as well as the unique approach to social change that characterizes the work of the Bahá'í community, and contrast these with contemporary Western-liberal models of governance and social change.

Elements of the Bahá'í system of governance that will be discussed include: the institution of the Covenant that provides the unifying foundation underlying all Bahá'í administration; the parallel structure of elected governing assemblies and appointed individual counselors to those assemblies that has been built upon this foundation; the electoral process through which assemblies are elected, which is democratic yet has no nominations, campaigning, parties, or competition of any form; the consultative decision-making process through which elected assemblies make decisions, which involves freedom of expression and critical inquiry yet is unifying and non-adversarial; and the regular consultative gatherings of local communities that provide a mechanism for ongoing feedback and interchange between assemblies and the communities they serve.

Elements of the Bahá'í approach to social change that will be discussed include: the principle of unity and consistency between the means and the ends of social change; the prohibition against proselytizing that informs all processes of community growth and development; principles underlying Bahá'í processes of social and economic development; the non-adversarial strategy of construction and attraction that characterizes the work of the Bahá'í community; the principles of non-resistance and constructive resilience that characterize the Bahá'í response to religious persecution and repression; and the outcomes, to date, of this overall approach to social change.