

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution: Embracing Principles while Disapproving Methodologies¹

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Abstract

This article explores ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and proposes that, deeply rooted in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings and teachings, His attitude was one of embracing the principles of constitutionalism while disapproving the confrontational nature of the interactions. After investigating some passages in the Bahá’í Writings relevant to the topic and discussing (1) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s efforts to reconcile the *majlis* and the court of the *Shah* while urging Bahá’ís to do the same (or withdraw if unsuccessful); (2) His warnings against foreign interference, the involvement of the ‘ulamá in politics, and the role of *Yahyáyís* in the Revolution; (3) His views on obedience to the government and non-interference in partisan politics; and (4) His concern that the Bahá’ís would be scapegoated if they intervened, this article focuses on His view that real social change needs to start at the moral-ethical level, a corollary of spiritual rejuvenation. The article concludes by examining this view as a guideline for Bahá’í action in times of sociopolitical turmoil as exemplified by the April 2011 letter of the Bahá’ís of Egypt to the people of that country.

Résumé

L’auteur explore ici la position de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ concernant la Révolution constitutionnaliste iranienne (1906-1911). Il propose que ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’, dont les conceptions étaient profondément ancrées dans les écrits et les enseignements de Bahá’u’lláh, soutenait les principes du constitutionnalisme tout en désapprouvant la nature conflictuelle des interactions. Après avoir approfondi certains passag-

es des écrits bahá'ís sur le sujet et avoir examiné 1) les efforts déployés par 'Abdu'l-Bahá pour que le *majlis* (Assemblée nationale constituante) et la cour du Shah se réconcilient, tout en exhortant les bahá'ís à œuvrer en ce sens (ou à se retirer, en cas d'échec); 2) ses avertissements concernant l'ingérence étrangère, la participation des oulémas dans les affaires politiques et le rôle des yahyáyís dans la Révolution; 3) ses vues sur l'obéissance au gouvernement et la non ingérence dans la politique partisane; 4) sa crainte que les bahá'ís servent de boucs émissaires s'ils intervenaient, l'auteur souligne le point de vue de 'Abdu'l-Bahá selon lequel un changement social véritable doit d'abord s'opérer au niveau éthique et moral, corollaire d'un renouvellement spirituel. L'auteur conclut en présentant ce point de vue comme une norme à suivre pour orienter l'action bahá'ie durant les périodes de bouleversements sociopolitiques, comme le démontre la lettre d'avril 2011 que les bahá'ís d'Égypte ont adressée à leurs compatriotes.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la orientación de Ábdu'l-Bahá hacia la Revolución Constitucional Iraní (1906 – 11) y propone que Su actitud, profundamente arraigada en los escritos y las enseñanzas de Bahá'u'lláh, fue de abrazar los principios del Constitucionalismo mientras desaprobaba la naturaleza confrontacional de las interacciones. Después de investigar algunos pasajes en los Escritos Bahá'ís relevantes al tema y discutiendo (1) los esfuerzos de 'Abdu'l-Bahá por reconciliar los *majlis* y la corte mientras instaba a los bahá'ís a hacer

lo mismo (o retirarse si no eran exitosos); (2) Sus advertencias en contra de la interferencia internacional, la participación de la 'ulamá en la política, y el rol de los Yahyáyís en la Revolución; (3) Su punto de vista acerca de la obediencia al gobierno y la no-interferencia en la política partidista; y (4) Su preocupación que los bahá'ís se convertirían en el chivo expiatorio si intervenían, este artículo se enfoca en Su perspectiva que el cambio social real necesita empezar al nivel moral-ético, un corolario del rejuvenecimiento espiritual. El artículo concluye examinando este punto de vista como una directriz para la acción bahá'í en tiempos de turbulencia sociopolítica como se ejemplifica en la carta de abril, 2011 de los bahá'ís de Egipto a los ciudadanos de su país.

'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed "joy and gladness" and hailed the formation of Iran's first *majlis* (parliament) as an achievement that was "in accordance with the explicit command of the Most Holy Book" ("Milání Collection" 222; Ra'fatí 67–68).² More than thirty years

2 This tablet was written in response to a letter from Washington, DC sent by "Mírzá Aḥmad" (most probably Mírzá Aḥmad Isfahani, later surnamed "Sohrab") recounting the joy in the Iranian embassy and the delight of American men of letters over the news of the formation of the *majlis*. The rest of this tablet has a different tone, which will be discussed later. A provisional translation of this tablet is available (*Tablets of Abdul-Baha*

earlier, in His 1875 *Kitáb-i-Asrár-i-Ghaybíyyihli-Asbáb-i-Madaniyyih* (known as *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih* and translated as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*), 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself had openly proposed the creation of a representative parliament, becoming perhaps the second Iranian—after His father, Bahá'u'lláh—to do so.³ He encouraged the establishment of “councils” (*majális*) and “consultative assemblies” (*maháfil-i-mashvarat*) composed of devout and learned “elected representatives” (*a'dáy-i-muntakhabih*) (22).⁴ Yet, as the

Abbas 3:492–94). In several other tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the Constitutional Revolution as the (partial) fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's prophecy concerning Tehran (see *Ishráqkhávarí, Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 9:1; *Mázindaráni, Amr va Khalq* 4:443–44, 451). Elsewhere, He asserts that the warnings (*indhárát*) about Tehran had not yet been fulfilled in their entirety (*Mázindaráni, Amr va Khalq* 4:451).

3 As we will see, Bahá'u'lláh was the first Iranian to bring constitutionalism and parliamentary government to the attention of His audience. On *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih*, see Saiedi, *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih va Mas'aliy-i-Tajjadud*; Yazdani, “*Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih*,” 178–97. For a comparative appraisal of the *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih*, see, Yazdani, “*Muqáyisiy-i-Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih*,” 127–67.

4 So prominent a theme was constitutionalism in the *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih* that in 1912 the Qájár prince,

early protests of the constitutional movement commenced, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised Bahá'is to remain nonpartisan (*bítaraf*) and refused to sanction their participation in the uprisings. As the confrontation between the Constitutionalists and Royalists heated up, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised His followers to work to reconcile the two camps. If they could not succeed in reconciling the two sides, they were to simply withdraw. This article explores 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reactions to and views on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911,⁵ suggesting

'Aynu's-Salṭanih, wrote of it, “the book was written thirty years ago. The author does not reveal his name but it is obvious he is a Bahá'í. He stresses ethics and morality (*akhláq*), encourages the people of Iran to educate themselves, and speaks of the benefits of constitutional government (*husn-i-hukumat-i-mashrútiyih*), stressing the need for elected representatives to be educated and behave ethically. Had the king and people of the time acted according [to the precepts of this book], the current conditions of our country would be significantly improved” ('Aynu's-Salṭanih, 5:3769).

5 On the Constitutional Revolution, see (in chronological order; for details see Works Cited section): Browne, *The Persian Revolution*; Dawlatábádí, *Ḥayát-i-Yahyá*; Kasraví, *Tárikh-i-Mashrúṭiy-i-Irán*; Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. “The Formation of Two Revolutionary Discourses in modern Iran”; Martin, *Islam and Modernism*;

that, far from demonstrating “indifference” or lack of patriotism on the part of Bahá'ís, as the opponents of the Faith have sometimes claimed, His decisions were based on advocating one mode of social action while rejecting another. In accordance with the Bahá'í worldview and ethos ushered in by Bahá'u'lláh, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá endorsed peaceful social discourse and consultation and rejected conflict and contention between the government and the nation. Furthermore, His rejection of the ongoing confrontation between the two was at the core an anticolonial stance, heavily concerned with the protection of the country from foreign encroachments. In addition, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was convinced that the interference of the ‘ulamá (Shí'í clerics) in political affairs—as had been the case during the Constitutional Movement—would have dire consequences for the country, and He was wary of the Azalís⁶ who were heavily involved in the Revolution and exploited the turmoil to hurt the Bahá'ís. The involvement of these two

Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution*; Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*; Bonakdarian, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution*; Chehabi and Martin, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution*. See also multiple entries in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Constitutional Revolution.”

6 The followers of Bahá'u'lláh's half-brother, Yahyá (d.1912), who considered him the successor to the Báb.

groups (the ‘ulamá and the Azalís), He believed, provided the ground for scapegoating Bahá'ís in the political unrest raging in Iran. This article also suggests that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to sociopolitical action during the critical period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution—that is, His attempts to foster harmony through discourse and consultation rather than partisanship—should be viewed as the model for a proper Bahá'í response to political upheavals. The April 2011 open letter from the Bahá'ís of Egypt to their fellow citizens is a recent example of following ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's paradigm in this regard.

This article does not intend to provide a summary of the history of the Bahá'í community of Iran during the Constitutional Revolution. It does not cover the contributions made by the Bahá'í community to the development of the ideals of constitutionalism through the gradual and subtle diffusion of related Bahá'í principles and practices, such as the formation of elective consultative assemblies and educational activities.⁷ Nor does this

7 This has already started to be studied by other scholars. See, for example, Momen, “The Bahá'ís and the Constitutional Revolution”; idem, “The Constitutional Movement and the Bahá'ís of Iran”; Vahman, “Nufúdh-i-Andíshiháy-i-Bábí va Bahá'í”; idem, “Ta'thír-i-Diyánat-i-Bábí va Bahá'í”; Mashhúrí, *Rag-i-Ták*; Amini, *Rastákhíz-i-Pinhán*.

study aim to examine the wide range of accusations made against the Bahá'ís during the Constitutional Revolution. Rather, the scope of this article is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's views concerning the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the decisions He made during this period. We will see how drawing on and guided by Bahá'u'lláh's writings and teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá embraced the principles of constitutionalism but disapproved approaches taken to achieve them during the Revolution. It would therefore only be appropriate to begin by reviewing some relevant concepts in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF
BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

The following overview of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh highlights His advocacy of constitutionalism and the critical role of social discourse and consultation in solving sociopolitical disputes. Furthermore, this section will show that the principle of obedience, submission, and loyalty to one's government and its corollary principle, noninterference in partisan politics, both had their roots in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and were not originated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Addressing Tehran in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* circa 1873, Bahá'u'lláh predicted the rule of people over that city: “[e]relong will the state of affairs within thee be changed, and the reins of power

fall into the hands of the people” (54, para. 93). Before His 1868 exile to Akká, He praised Queen Victoria for having “entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people,” assuring her that “thereby the foundations of the edifice” of her affairs would be strengthened and “the hearts of all” that are beneath her shadow “whether high or low” would be “tranquillized” (*Summons* 90). With these words, Bahá'u'lláh can be regarded as the first Iranian thinker who advocated representative government. Later, around 1891, He stated His preference for a form of government that combined republicanism with monarchy: “Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God” (*Tablets* 28). In His 1891 *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá* (Tablet of the World), He clearly advocated for Constitutional monarchy—the British system of parliamentary democracy: “The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people” (*Tablets* 93). Writing at a time of political unrest when the Tobacco Revolt, which has been regarded as “perhaps the nearest thing to the European practice

of politics that had ever been experienced in Iranian history” (Katouzian 165), was well under way, He emphasized the necessity of “certain laws and principles” for Persia, and advised that “His Majesty,” the “learned divines,” and “high-ranking rulers” should gather together in a fixed place and consult on the affairs of people. He asserted that “any measures other than” this consultative process would result in “chaos and commotion” (*Tablets* 92). It seems that during the confrontation of some of the clerics and the merchants with the government (or more specifically, the king) following the tobacco concession, Bahá'u'lláh invited the two sides to come together and agree on measures to promote the prosperity of the people. One finds in this passage yet another articulation of the power of consultation and discourse, which He had frequently called for in His writings, as the main method for effecting social change. It would be difficult to overemphasize the centrality of this approach in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

On a related note, Bahá'u'lláh emphasized that His followers were fundamentally different from the Bábí militants, whose memory lingered in the mind of the Qájár monarch⁸ and

8 This fact can easily be seen in Násiri'd-Dín Sháh's remarks to Mírzáy-i-Áshftiyání (who played a key role in the Tobacco Revolt) to the effect that, had it not been for the government's protection, “the Bábís of Tíhrán would have beheaded

whose ways His own disciples had been accused of following.⁹ In His tablet to Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, Bahá'u'lláh declared that “sedition hath never been pleasing unto God.” Likely having the attempted assassination of the Sháh in mind, He categorically disassociated Himself and His followers from violence, stating, “. . . nor were the acts committed in the past by certain foolish ones acceptable in His sight. . . . Know ye that to be killed in the path of His good pleasure is better for you than to kill” (*Summons* 110). In His last major work, Bahá'u'lláh calls attention to how His teachings transformed the early Bábí militancy to peaceful obedience and submission:

Previous to these forty years controversies and conflicts continually prevailed and agitated the servants of God. But since then, aided by the hosts of wisdom, of utterance, of exhortations and understanding, they have all seized and taken fast hold of the firm cord of patience and of the shining hem of fortitude, in such wise that this wronged people endured steadfastly whatever befell them,

the ‘ulamá” (Názimu'l-Islám 23).

9 See for example, Siyyid Jamálu'd-Dín-i-Afghání's entry on “Babisme” [by which he meant the Bahá'í Faith] in Bustání's encyclopedia in which he accuses Bahá'u'lláh's followers of committing violence.

and committed everything unto God. (*Epistle 71–72*)

Closely related to this transformation in the sociopolitical behavior of the followers of the new religion is Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on their obedience to the government, a principle to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers in the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* and, as we will see, in numerous tablets revealed by Him during the Constitutional Revolution. As an injunction in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh revealed, "None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men's hearts" (54 para. 95). In the *Lawḥ-i-Dhabíh*, He exhorted the same:

Forbear ye from concerning yourselves with the affairs of this world and all that pertaineth unto it, or from meddling with the activities of those who are its outward leaders.

The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. *To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority.* That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts; and of these the loved ones of Him Who

is the Sovereign Truth are, in this Day, as the keys.¹⁰ (*Gleanings 241*; emphasis added)

This theme appears in His other writings, as well. In the *Bishárát* (Glad-Tidings), one of the tablets designed to supplement the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, He ordained that "[i]n every country where any of this people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness" (*Tablets 22–23*).¹¹ During a political turmoil when the government had arrested a couple of Bahá'ís along with tens of people who possessed anti-governmental papers,¹² He swore by the "Sun of Truth" that His followers were "sanctified" from "unseemly acts and reprehensible doings" and added that such deeds were acts of "the ignoble." He then emphasized that His believers were "pro-state and pro-people" (*dawlat-kháh va millat-kháh*) (*Ishráqkhávarí, Má'idíy-i-Ásmání 4: 125–26, 133*).¹³ Again, in

10 The original Persian of the passage appears in Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtídárát* 324.

11 As we will see later, during the Constitutional Revolution, 'Abdu'l-Bahá paraphrases these words of Bahá'u'lláh in tablets advising Bahá'ís to avoid interference in the conflicts.

12 For the historical details, see Yazdani, *Awḍá'-i-Ijtimá'-i-Írán dar 'Ahd-i-Qájár* 157–99.

13 There is historical evidence that

His tablet to Muḥammad Taqí-i-Najafí,
He wrote,

Every nation must have a high regard for the position of its sovereign, must be submissive unto him, must carry out his behests, and hold fast his authority. The sovereigns of the earth have been and are the manifestations of the power, the grandeur and the majesty of God. This Wronged One hath at no time dealt deceitfully with anyone. (*Epistle* 89–90)

And finally, He commanded in His will, the *Kitáb-i-'Ahdí*:

O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the

at this time the notion of noninterference in activities against the government as a Bahá'í principle was already understood among (at least, deepened and prominent) Bahá'ís. One of the Bahá'ís arrested at this occasion was Mullá 'Alí-Akbar Ayádí. Referring to the cause of the arrest and to accusations leveled against others (i.e., having anti-governmental papers), he told the governor of Tehran, Kámrán Mírzá, “we never participate in such discussions” (Sayyáh 362). Recounting this episode, his wife wrote in her autobiography that she was told, “they had been arrested on the charge of supporting the republican party, whereas it was conclusively proved that they had entirely abstained from interference in politics” (Fatímih Khanum 61).

manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. . . . It is incumbent upon everyone to aid those daysprings of authority and sources of command who are adorned with the ornament of equity and justice. (*Tablets* 221)

With this background, we can now turn to a study of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Constitutional Revolution. It goes without saying that as with any other research, what is presented is the result of the author's findings based on the currently available sources.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ HEARS ABOUT THE MOVEMENT

As far as available sources indicate, among the events that soon came to be known as the Constitutional Revolution, the first thing on which 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented was Muẓaffaru'd-Dín Sháh's issuing a statement ordering the formation of “a house of justice” (*'idálat-kháníh*). In a tablet—the first half of which is about a cholera outbreak that had been relatively short-lived in Iran as compared to nearby countries—'Abdu'l-Bahá

praises the Sháh and his prime minister for their virtues and their concern for the welfare of people. He then moves on to commend the two for having instituted in every city judicial courts where conflicts among people could be resolved and their rights secured. He recounts the positive consequences of this decision: it will bring comfort, and the cornerstone of the greatest civilization will be laid in Iran as it has in other regions, and “this is the beginning of the reform of the country.” Then, He expresses hope: “God willing, they will succeed in implementing [the decision], and the ignorant will abandon their shamelessness and obey the just laws.” He then moves on to another topic (*Makátib* 4: 68–70; “Milání Collection” 88–91). It is important to note that, at this stage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw the development as a plan for judiciary reform. The formation of “a house of justice,” to which Muzaffaru’d-Dín Sháh had just consented, was one of the demands of some two thousand protestors who had taken sanctuary (*bast*) at the Shrine of Sháh ‘Abdu’l-‘Azím in December 1905. At that point, still there was no expressed demand for a parliament or a constitution. Those demands came later, once the Sháh did not fulfill this promise (Kasraví 68; Browne 114; Bayat 114–15; Afary 52). The importance of the remark ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes at the end must not be lost on us. His reference to “the ignorant” who, He hopes, will “abandon their shamelessness” is

likely an indication of His disapproval of the confrontational ways in which “a house of justice” was demanded.¹⁴ As other tablets indicate, from the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá received letters from prominent Bahá’ís, such as the Hand of the Cause Mullá ‘Alí-i-Akbar-i-Ayádí (Hájí Ákhúnd) notifying Him about the events unfolding in Iran.¹⁵ Apparently, some Bahá’ís expressed a wish to join the protests. Given the

14 While Juan Cole’s recognition of the relevance of this tablet to the early stages of what would later emerge as the Constitutional Revolution and his translation of this same tablet are most helpful, his decision to title his translation “‘Abdu’l-Baha on the Establishment of Civil Courts in Iran as a Prelude to the Inauguration of the first Iranian Parliament (Jan. 1906?)” is ahistoric. As the text of the tablet shows, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw the decree as the first step to a purely judicial reform. At that stage, neither to Him, nor to others, could the formation of a judicial court have been regarded as a prelude to the parliament. In fact, even the inclusion of the item in the list of the requests of the *bastís* was incidental and, apparently, the result of the immediate improvising of Yaḥyá Dawlatábádí, who acted as one of the intermediaries between the protestors and the premier (Dawlatábádí 2:32).

15 This can be inferred from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s responses. See, for example, *Ishráqkhávarí, Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:196.

emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings on the rule of law, on constitutionalism, and given the long history of persecution at the hands of the Qájárs, such tendencies were to be expected. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, faithful to the ethos created by Bahá'u'lláh, did not approve of a confrontational attitude vis-à-vis the government. He advised the Bahá'ís to remain impartial well-wishers of both sides. In a tablet addressing Mírzá Hasan-i-Ṭáliqání (Adíb), He writes,

In the beginning of the revolution, 'Abdu'l-Bahá exerted the utmost effort to ensure that the friends remain impartial well-wishers of both sides. Some however distorted [my instructions] and interfered. . . . I summoned Jináb-i-Áqá Siyyid 'Alí-Akbar¹⁶ and told him: 'I wanted to prevent the friends from interfering but it wasn't possible. Some insist on participating [in the revolution]. Their actions will have detrimental results.¹⁷ (Mázindaráni, *Asráru'l-Áthár* 1: 82–83)

16 The Hand of the Cause, Mullá 'Alí-Akbar Ayadí, also known as Háji Ákhúnd. For his biography, see 'Alá'í 371–401.

17 'Abdu'l-Bahá has referred in other tablets to the advice He gave the friends “from the very beginning of the Revolution” (*az bidáyat-i-inqiláb*) to not get involved in the strife. See, for example, Browne 428; *Ishráqkhávarí*, *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání*, 5:196.

Apparently, a number of Bahá'ís had difficulty understanding the logic behind His advice. As He indicates in another tablet, upon hearing His order to the friends to remain impartial, “some weak ones (*ba'di du'afá*) complained,” wondering why “a public uprising for the establishment of justice” should be “condemned and despised” (*madhmúm va maqdúh*) (Mázindaráni, *Amr va Khalq* 4: 442). Moojan Momen has shown that in Sári, Mázindarán, Bahá'ís did participate in the activities of the Constitutionalists (“The Baha'is and the Constitutional Revolution”). We also know that a few individuals, such as the Qájár prince, poet, and scholar, *Shaykhu'r-Ra'is* (d. 1918),¹⁸ joined the protests. However, given the explicit texts of the tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which states otherwise (see below), such cases seem to have been exceptions to the rule. The majority of Bahá'ís obeyed 'Abdu'l-Bahá's advice and remained practically impartial, even though they were naturally hoping for constitutionalism and the establishment of a parliament.¹⁹ As

18 On *Shaykhu'r-Ra'is* see Dhuká'í Baydá'í, 1: 278–91; Mázindaráni, *Tárikh-i-Zuhúru'l-Haqq*, 6:44–65; Cole, “Autobiography and Silence,” 91–126; idem, “The Provincial Politics,” 119–26.

19 For a firsthand record, see 'Abdu'l-Husayn Áyati (Ávárih)'s description of the situation, in *Kawákib*, 2:165. See also the later discussion of Mírzá Hasan-i-Adíb's attitude.

is discussed later, the involvement of the 'ulamá and the Azalís were among the factors influencing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assessment of the Constitutional Revolution and the guidance He gave to His followers.

It has been suggested that during the early stages of the Constitutional Revolution, in 1906, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advised Bahá'ís to support the movement, and it was only later, in 1907, that He changed His mind and guided them to withdraw.²⁰ This author has

20 See, for example, Amanat 42; Momen, "The Constitutional Movement and the Bahá'ís of Iran" 11; idem, "The Bahá'ís and the Constitutional Revolution" 353. Two sources have been used for this claim: Gail 32, and Afán 556. Both sources indicate that in early 1907, when the conflict between the *majlis* and the Court had escalated, tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized noninvolvement. This, however, does not mean that prior to this date 'Abdu'l-Bahá had supported Bahá'ís joining the protests. In light of the evidence indicating that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "from the very beginning," advised Bahá'ís not to interfere in conflicts, His 1907 orders in this regard seem to be simply a forceful reiteration of previous guidance. Also, given how slow communication between Iran and Palestine was at the time, it could well be that some of the tablets written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in early 1907 in actuality contained responses to questions Bahá'ís had posed much earlier on whether or not to get involved.

not found a single tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá advising the friends to join the protests even in their early stages. His tablets and other primary available sources in fact state the contrary. Both in the early stages, and later during the time of the first *majlis*, He directed the Bahá'ís to abstain from participating in confrontational and violent activities.²¹ He extols and applauds this nonparticipation in words such as these:

Glorified be God, in this mass movement (*ḥarakat-i-'umúmi*) in Iran, it became clear that not a single Bahá'í was in the instigating societies (*anjumanha-yi mutahrikih*), nay, all withdrew themselves, and did not interfere in political matters, and were obedient to the State and well-wishers of the Nation. Even among the crowd that took refuge in the honored embassy of Britain at the

21 According to a Bahá'í contemporary to the movement, and a keen observer of developments, at the time of the formation of the first *majlis*, within the span of one year, 'Abdu'l-Bahá issued from "one hundred and ninety to two hundred tablets" addressed to the Bahá'ís of Tehran. In "more than one hundred" of these tablets, He advised against "joining the *anjumans*, opposing the king, and interfering in political affairs," commenting that "this *majlis* is not one concerned with the comfort and prosperity of people" ('Aláqband 9).

beginning of the protests, there was not a single Bahá'í.²² (“Mílání Collection” 106)

Furthermore, His references to other early events in the movement, for example, the *bast* of the ‘ulamá in Qum and their triumphant return to the city (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 5:196), do not reveal *any* support for these events.²³ It would seem, therefore, very unlikely that at the same time He could have been supportive of such moves.

The memoirs of Bahá'ís contemporary to the Constitutional Movement, such as those of Yúnis *Khán-i-Afrúkh-tih* and Ḥabíb Mu'ayyad, also clearly convey the sense that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá advised the believers *from early on* to avoid participating in the conflicts (Mu'ayyad 1:51; Afrúkh-tih 534–46). Furthermore, not only do these memoirs not tell us of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's “support” of the early stages of the movement or His encouragement of Bahá'ís to join the protests, but also they reveal His unhappiness with the insistence of a number of Bahá'ís in this regard: “I wrote them several times. . . . Each time, they would respond back, . . . I

22 Elsewhere, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that “not a single Bahá'í” could be found among the people who took refuge in the British Embassy “at the beginning of the troubles” (*Makátib* 4:177).

23 The event to which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá referred was the return of the ‘ulamá from Qum with the royal carriage sent to bring them back to Tehran. See Bayat 139.

wrote so many times. I saw that they do not understand . . . no matter how many times I wrote ‘obey the government of the time.’ . . . Finally, I wrote, ‘To obey the *Sháh* is to obey God” (Afrúkh-tih 535–36). What Ḥabíb Mu'ayyad has recorded clearly reflects both the fact that the majority of Iranian Bahá'ís refrained from participating in the conflicts with the government and that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was not happy with the action of those who did: “Frequently, and emphatically, I wrote them to refrain from interfering in politics. Praised be God that they did not interfere. That is why they are safe. If some of them were negligent (*ghaflat kardand*) and did interfere, they themselves suffered the harm (*durrash bi khud-i-ánhá várid shud*). . . . I am very happy with those who did not interfere” (1:51). While as Bahá'u'lláh's successor and the Center of His Covenant ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was no doubt an advocate of constitutionalism, His ideas on how to establish it were different from those advanced by activists in Iran. He believed that this goal had to be achieved and consolidated through discourse. He was adamant in rejecting a confrontational mode of action. Had the people requested the *Sháh* to establish a parliament, He wrote, “with humility, and dignity” (i.e., rather than protest), the *Sháh* would, of course, have accepted the request (“Mílání Collection” 221–22). This leads us to discuss the kind of participation ‘Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged Bahá'ís to practice.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ PARTICIPATES
AND CONTRIBUTES

In 1907, at the time of the first *majlis*, after Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh had ascended to the throne and the confrontation between the Constitutionalists and Royalists had worsened, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tried to reconcile the two sides and ordered the Bahá’ís to do the same. He also ordered them to share (*bi ‘umúm-i-nás binamá’id*) the treatise He had written fourteen years earlier, the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, in order to offer pertinent guidance to the people and the government. In the following pages, I discuss these two sets of actions as well as the issues of concern to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* and in His tablets from the Constitutional period. First, an introduction to the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* is in order.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ GUIDES AND WARNS:
THE *RISÁLIY-I-SIYÁSÍYYIH*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* in 1893 in the aftermath of the Tobacco Revolt.²⁴ That He ordered this work be widely distributed or brought to the attention of people by the believers in Iran, both at that time and in 1907, demonstrates on the one hand the importance of the work in clarifying the

Bahá’í position vis-à-vis the spreading political turmoil, and on the other hand the similarities He saw between the Tobacco Revolt and the Constitutional Movement, which have also been attested to by historians who describe the former as a “dress rehearsal” for the latter (Afary 17). Concerning the historical circumstances that led to the writing of this treatise, it suffices to say that, as previously mentioned, the Tobacco Revolt has been regarded as the first political movement in Iran’s history. In 1891, Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh sold a monopoly for the production, sale, and export of Iranian tobacco to the British firm Talbot. This sale was canceled by 1892, in part because of a nationwide opposition and boycott spearheaded by merchants and the ‘ulamá, and in part because of Russian opposition. An exhaustive discussion of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* is beyond the scope of this article. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own description of it, however, is enlightening on its role and content. In a tablet dated 11 Jamádiyu’l-Úlá 1325 (June 22, 1907) He indicates that He had outlined in the work His general guidelines on the relations between the ruler and the ruled: “In that epistle, the sacred rights of the state and the protected (*mar’íyyih*) rights of the nation, the relationship between rulers and their subjects (*rá’i va ra’íyyat*), and the ties between those who govern and those who are governed, and the obligations of those who lead and those who are led have been set forth.” (The tablet appears at the

24 On *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, see Yazdani, “*Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*.”

beginning of the 1934 edition of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*.) Through writing the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* and requesting that it be brought to the attention of the general public, including the decision-making figures in the critical circumstances of 1907, 'Abdu'l-Bahá purposely and actively engaged in social discourse. This was His preferred mode of action vis-à-vis the unfolding turmoil. The *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* contained His counsels for the state and the nation in general, and for the Bahá'ís in particular. He regarded the treatise as the core of His general counsels and advice about developments in Iran. A tablet written in 1912 (1330 H̄Q), after the second *majlis* was dissolved, and the country was cast into chaos, indicates His own view of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*:

Copies of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* . . . are, of course, available throughout Tehran. Refer to this Treatise and show it to others [so that they see that] the current course of events were foretold [in it]. . . . *Study it so that you will see that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has not neglected in giving counsels and offering guidance, but alas, the ears [are] deaf and the eyes blind (Ishráqkhávarí, Má'idíy-i-Ásmání 5:198, emphasis added).*

On the content of the treatise, more is shared later. As mentioned earlier, giving advice through the

Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih was not the only way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá participated in the social discourse of that period; He also engaged more directly on a matter of immediate concern: the conflict between the court and the *majlis*.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ EMPHASIZES THE INTERMINGLING OF THE STATE AND THE NATION

As soon as the first *majlis* was formed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed His concern over the possibility of a rift between it and the state. In fact, even in the tablet at the opening of this article the jubilant tone at its beginning contrasts with stating this worry at the end: "Pray that the nation obeys the government with utmost contentment, is submissive to the wise counsels of the attendants of the center of kingship, gives no heed to the whisperings of those who foment discord, does not rise up against the state, as the Russian Duma did, and does not afflict the country with this enormous calamity ("Mílání Collection" 222)."²⁵ Subsequent events

25 In an apparent attempt to vindicate his position that 'Abdu'l-Bahá supported the Constitutional Revolution in Iran at its early stages, Juan Cole relies simply on his translation of the first (the jubilant, congratulatory) part of this tablet ("Millennialism" 302). Unfortunately, in doing so, he omits two important passages that problematize his view. In the first of these, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expresses His distrust of the involvement of the 'ulamá

proved that His concern was justified.

in the movement. Immediately after the sentences that Cole has chosen to quote, 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds the conjunction "but" and goes on to write what has been cited above regarding the involvement of the 'ulamá in the movement. In the second passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds the reader of His support for obedience to the government by inviting him to "pray" that the nation will obey the state and the monarchy ("Milání Collection" 222–23). Elsewhere, Cole translates the tablet in its entirety, without a precise rendering of a key sentence in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls for the nation's obedience to the court and the king: *tamkín az áráy-i-šá'ibiy-i-mulázimán-i-markaz-i-salṭanat kunad*: "be submissive to the wise counsels of the attendants of the center of kingship" (provisional translation). Cole mistranslated this sentence as "will invest with authority the considered views of the public servants at the center of authority" ("Abdu'l-Baha Lauds"). Relying on Cole's translation of this tablet, Kavian Milani writes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of the formation of the *majlis* "in strongest" and "glowing" terms (Milani "Bahá'í Discourses," 147, 149), but fails to acknowledge that in the same tablet 'Abdu'l-Bahá expresses His distrust of the movement because of the 'ulamá's involvement, and commands the Bahá'ís to obey the monarch—the latter explicit and clear in the original Persian. Elsewhere, Milani refers to a tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as containing the praise for the formation of the *majlis* (Milani, "Niḥdat-i-Mašhrúṭíyyat"). The tablet Milani cites, however, does not contain any explicit reference to the *majlis* or constitutionalism.

During the fierce conflicts between the *majlis* and Muḥammad-'Alí Sháh,²⁶ in addition to offering advice via the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as He recounted in later tablets, had also "secretly" (*khafíyyan*) "counseled the parties to the utmost degree (*bih aḥzáb naháyat-i-našáyih mujrá gashṭ*)" (*Makátib* 5:173). His emphasis at this time was on the paramount need for "the State and the Nation"²⁷ to inter-

In this tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá simply praises the newly deceased Muḥaffaru'd-Dín Sháh for having been a "well-wisher of the Nation," "just" and "kind," while expressing hope that the new Sháh will follow in his father's footsteps and "revive the State and Nation of Iran" ("Milání Collection" 126).

26 Conflict between Muḥammad-'Alí Sháh and the *majlis* started at the beginning of his reign in January 1907 and led to his bombardment of the *majlis* on 23 June 1908 when the civil war and the period called "the Lesser Despotism" started. See Browne, *The Persian Revolution*, 133 ff.; Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution*, 153–56, 215–31; Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 92–95, 133, 140.

27 The words He uses here (and in several other tablets with this theme) are "dawlat" and "millat." While "millat" can be confidently translated as "nation," (see Ashraf, "Iranian Identity"), some might find translating "dawlat" as "state" inaccurate. Browne, for example, preferred to render "dawlat" as "the Court" (428), apparently on account of the fact that in this particular context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was

mingle like “milk and honey” (*shahd va shír*). He recounts that He had made this point “time and again, explicitly, with utmost clarity” in His letters to “both sides” of the conflict, that is, to the Monarch and his supporters on the one side, and to the Constitutionals on the other. He warns that without such intermingling (intimate association) between the two sides, “prosperity” (*faláh va najáh*) would in no way be possible. Iran would be “ruined,” and most unfortunate of all, such a situation (conflict, rift, lack of unity, and open confrontation between the government and society) would inevitably lead to “neighboring” (*mutajávirih*) countries interfering (*mudákhilih*) in Iran’s internal affairs.²⁸ At one point, He even warns of possible encroachment by certain “transgressor” (*mutajávizih*) states (*Makátib* 5:173). In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá considers the organic unity of the State and the Nation a fundamental prerequisite not only for the progress of the country but also for its independence and its power to resist against the encroachments of the foreign powers. In His advice to both Muhammad ‘Ali Sháh and the Constitutionals, He was, therefore, seriously concerned with the prosperity of the country and the protection of its integrity and independence.

basically referring to the king’s relationship with the *majlis* (and *anjumans*).

28 For another tablet containing the same themes, see “Tablets in Honor of Milání” 66.

Thus, implicitly and explicitly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stance in fostering unity between the State and the Nation was—to use a more contemporary term—“anticolonial.” It was anticolonial in its soft but strong defense and advocacy of conditions that He believed were conducive to preserving the integrity of the country, as opposed to the harsh and violent ways that characterized the interaction between the government and society at the time. The turn of events proved the validity of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concerns. Foreign intervention that had existed since the early nineteenth century—against which Bahá’u’lláh Himself had warned²⁹—increased remarkably with the chaos that overtook the country during and in the aftermath of the Revolution. In their 1907 convention, the Russians and the British divided Iran into respective spheres of influence, allocating northern Iran to Russia and the southwest to Britain. In 1909, the

29 In a 1891 tablet, Bahá’u’lláh laments the rising influence of foreign powers in Iran, predicting cryptically that “erelong the two fingers will join” (*Ish-ráqkhávarí, Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 4:36; qtd. in Mázindarání, *Amr va Khalq* 4:438). In commenting on this passage, the Bahá’í scholar Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání suggests that that “the two fingers” refers to two foreign powers whose influence from the north and the south would ultimately rob Iran of any chance of national autonomy (*Asráru’l-Athár* 1:144).

Russians occupied Azerbaijan on the pretext of establishing law and order. In December 1911, they occupied the rest of their zone, including Tehran. Foreign encroachment intensified during World War I, and by 1920, Iran was, in the words of one prominent contemporary historian, a “classic failed state” (Abrahamian 62). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá found such confrontation and conflict counterproductive to the fortunes of the country. It is interesting to note that many years later, a leading radical figure among the Constitutionals, Siyyid Ḥasan Taqízádiḥ,³⁰ regretted not having taken a more reconciliatory stance. In the words of historian Katouzian, “it is instructive that, of all the people, Taqízádiḥ, the then intellectual tribune of the radical revolutionaries, expressed profound regret, in his old age, to a close friend for his total rejection of the Sháh’s offer of a return to constitutional regime short of his deposition” (186).³¹

What Did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Urge the Bahá’ís to Do?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá instructed the Bahá’ís to work to reconcile the two sides of the conflict: “the Friends of God must try

30 On Taqízádiḥ, see special issue of *Iran Nameh*, vol. XXI, issue 1–2 (Spring and Summer 1382/2003).

31 Taqízádiḥ had expressed his regret on the matter to Íraj Afshár (Katouzian 405).

to unify the state and the nation (*dar ta’lif-i-dawlat va millat kúshand*), so that they may heal [the rift between the two] (*iltiyám bakhshand*). If they are unable to do so, then they should withdraw (*kináriḥ girand*)” (*Makátib* 5:173). Whom exactly from both sides did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá counsel in private, and in what ways did the Bahá’ís attempt to “heal” relations are two of the questions that will need to be answered more fully by future research, but we do have some ideas in this regard. We do know that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a number of tablets to Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh advising him on the importance of intermingling (*ámikhtan*) the Court with the Nation (by which He basically meant the parliament representing the Nation and the *anjumans* supporting it in provinces). These tablets were written at a time when anti-constitutionalist ‘ulamá such as Shaykh Faḍlu’llah Núrí (d. 1909) “were fully supportive of the monarch’s right to rule and opposed to the *majlis* decision to have him simply reign like his British counterpart” (Bayat 262). We also know that at least one of the Hands of the Cause, Mírzá Ḥasan Adíbu’l-‘Ulamá (d. 1919), was in close association with some of the main constitutionalist figures. He was a scholar and one of the founders of the Tarbíyat School in Tehran. Because of his background and the elite social level he occupied, his circle of acquaintances included some eminent clerics and laymen. We know his constitutionalist friends had great respect

for him, considered him an erudite and open-minded person, and even solicited his opinion on issues (Suhráb 65). Given his rank, he was regularly in contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and may have served as a conduit through which 'Abdu'l-Bahá conveyed messages to the Constitutionals. The autobiography of 'Ináyatu'lláh Suhráb, one of Adíbu'l-'Ulamá's contemporaries who attended his classes, provides a rare window to the mentality of a seasoned and deepened Bahá'í (most probably directly guided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá) about the Constitutional Revolution.³² According to Suhráb, Adíbu'l-'Ulamá

fundamentally disagreed with the constitutionalists' radical, adventurous, and extremist spirit, and believed that in order to establish constitutionalism, proper tools and instruments must first be provided. Instead of contending with the Court and seditious instigation, what must be done is to educate people who can understand the principles of constitutionalism and put them into practice. He constantly advised his constitutionalist friends to establish schools and educate people. (Suhráb 66)

From Adíb's point of view, as Suhráb tells us, overthrowing despotism

32 I am grateful to Keyvan Mahjoor for graciously sharing with me an electronic copy of Suhráb's autobiography.

without there being an upright alternative (*qá'immaqám-i-şálih*) would lead to the return of despotism. "New people," he thought, "must be trained for implementing new principles." At the same time, Adíb was caring and sensitive about the plight of people and felt sorry for those who lost their lives in the struggle for constitutionalism. At one point, he quoted himself having told his son who had been comfortably sleeping, "Get up and see how hundreds like you, with thousands of dreams and wishes, have died on the road between Karaj and Tehran, their corpses rotting under the piercing sun!" (Suhráb 66).

OBEDIENCE TO THE GOVERNMENT AND NON-INTERFERENCE IN PARTISAN POLITICS

Central to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought about the proper way to advocate for constitutionalism was the principle of obedience to the legal government of the time. As was discussed previously, early in the Revolution, He indicated that constitutionalism should have been sought through peaceful dialogue with the monarch.³³ In the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, after quoting passages from Bahá'u'lláh's writings on

33 See earlier, under section "'Abdu'l-Bahá Hears about the Movement.'" The tablet appears in "Mílání Collection" 221–22.

respect and obedience to kings and rulers (11–17) in almost identical terms, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá exhorted the Bahá'ís to obey the government and the state:

All must be humble and submissive before the government and obedient before the throne. In obeying and serving the rulers, they must be sincere subjects and eager servants (10–11).

. . . *Wherefore, O friends of God, strive with heart and soul! Through pure intention and genuine desire, display the power of good-will toward the government and obedience to the State. This most important of commands is one of the ordinances of the lucid faith of God (fará'iq-i-dín-mubín), set down irrevocably in decisive tablets from the realm of glory.* (17; emphasis added)

Following His analogy of the government as the head and the people as the body, and emphasizing the “reciprocal rights” (*ḥuqúq mutabádil*) and “balanced affairs” (*shu'ún muta'ádil*) between the two, He asserted that once the government performs its role as the protector (*rá'í*) of the people, and the people obey the government, their relationship would be healed (50).

Likewise, during the Constitutional Revolution, in many tablets, both in the early stages of the movement and later, after the formation of the first *majlis*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá exhorted the Bahá'ís to

obey the government. For example, in a tablet that appears to have been written in 1906,³⁴ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá reminds the addressees (“the Spiritual Friends of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá”) that “the Abhá Beauty has destroyed the foundations of contention and conflict” and has ordered obedience to “just kings” so that the friends may be kind to all the people of the world and “obey the government with the utmost sincerity” (“Mílání Collection” 188).³⁵ In another tablet, written sometime between January 1907 and June 1908—the time of the conflict between the court and the *majlis*—the theme of obedience to the government is directly connected to the principle of noninterference in politics. In this tablet, in which He refers to the “turbulence” (*ightishásh*) in Iran, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá hopes for a healthy and strong relationship between the State and the Nation and desires for the king to reign with the utmost power and protect his subject. Then, He guides the Bahá'ís thus: “The friends of God must remain calm and composed and abstain from interfering in political

34 The tablet contains a reference to the structure of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of Ashgabat being in the process and getting close to completion. The structure of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of Ashgabat was completed in 1906, even though the external ornamentation took much longer (Badiee et al.).

35 Tablets with similar themes are numerous.

matters” (“Mílání Collection” 221–22).³⁶ Yet in another tablet, referring to the “blame” laid on Bahá’ís for having avoided joining the “excitements, seditions and *anjumans*” in Tehran and to accusations of them not being “patriots,” He responds that Bahá’ís sacrifice their souls for the people of the world, but “according to the explicit text, they are enjoined to comport themselves with the utmost honesty and trustworthiness toward the government of the country in which they live. There are many Writings in this regard” (“Tablets in Honor of Mílání” 49).³⁷

It can be said that for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the principle of noninterference in partisan politics was a natural extension and corollary of the principle of obedience to one’s government. His original guidance to the believers to abstain from confronting the government, and His advice to them during the second Parliament to try to send the Hands of the Cause as their representatives to that body (*Makátib* 2:257–63),³⁸ can

36 Examples of other tablets with similar content written during this time period are found on pages 117 and 224 of the same manuscript.

37 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is paraphrasing here the words of Bahá’u’lláh in the Tablet of Bishárát quoted earlier in this article.

38 Cole ascribes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s urging Bahá’ís to attempt to send the Hands of the Cause to the parliament, to the time right after the Constitution was signed, i.e., the first parliament (“Millennialism” 302). This is a particularly unfortunate error,

be understood in light of these two principles.³⁹ At a time when the confrontational nature of activities made that advocacy for constitutionalism was tantamount to opposing a still legitimate government, He advised the friends to withdraw. During the formation of the second Parliament, after the new government had been legally established, and participation (in politics) no longer meant partisan activity against a legal government, He encouraged the believers to send the Hands of the Cause to the *majlis* to play an active role and contribute to the betterment of the country as their representatives.⁴⁰

because the tablet in which He makes that command (*Makátib* 2:257–63) belongs to the second Constitutional period, that is the time after the Lesser Despotism, which Cole asserts was when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started to mandate that Bahá’ís dissociate themselves from the Constitutionalists, as a protective measure (“Millennialism” 302). It was based on such historical errors that Cole concluded, incorrectly, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not advocate non-involvement in politics as a principle, throughout this period. (“Millennialism” 302–303).

39 Milani has argued that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá based His decisions on developments in party politics inside Iran (“Bahá’í Discourses” 151), and changes to electoral laws (“Nihdat-i-Mashrúfiyyat”). Neither explanation seems plausible to this author: the former in no way encouraged Bahá’í membership, while the newly amended laws continued to exclude Bahá’ís.

40 Soon thereafter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ WARNS AGAINST THE
INTERFERENCE OF THE ‘ULAMÁ IN
POLITICAL MATTERS

One of the major factors that influenced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opinion of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution seems to have been the role played by the ‘ulamá. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had already expressed, in unequivocal language, His total rejection of the interference of the ‘ulamá in political issues. In fact, the “summary” of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, as He Himself puts it, is that “the interference of the ‘ulamá in political matters will have utterly destructive and harmful detriments (*maḍarrát-i-kullíyyih*)” (qtd. in *Ishráqkhávarí, Muḥádirát* 2:786–87). In the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, He draws a wall of separation between the responsibilities of the clergy and those of the state:

The duty of the doctors and divines is... to attend to the matters of the spirit and to promote the attributes of the All-Merciful. Whenever the leaders of God’s glorious Religion

changed His mind and ordered the Bahá’ís to forget about becoming members of parliament. Several factors, including the fact that the *majlis* had for all practical measures been reduced to a theater of conflict, accounted for this change. A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice explains the details (see Yazdani, *Awḍá’-i-Ijtimá’-i-Írán* 434).

and the pillars of His mighty Law have intervened in political affairs, and designed schemes and devised plans, it hath inevitably shattered the unity of the believers and scattered the ranks of the faithful; the flame of sedition hath been kindled and the fire of hostility hath consumed the world; the country hath been pillaged and plundered; and the people have fallen into the hands of the mediocre. (Universal House of Justice, n. pag.)⁴¹

41 In this same authorized translation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quoted as saying, “Were ye to refer to history, ye would find countless similar instances, each and all due to the interference of religious leaders in political affairs. These souls are meant to issue the ordinances of God, not to enforce them. That is, whenever the government inquireth of them, in matters of greater or lesser consequence, concerning the exigencies of the law of God and the true purport of His ordinances, they should set forth that which hath been deduced from His laws and is consonant with His religion. Beyond this, what can they know of political matters, of the protection of the subjects, the management of important affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the nation, the administration of the laws and statutes of the realm, and of internal and external issues?” (Universal House of Justice n. pag.). The original passages appear in *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* 20–21, 29–30.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá supports this position by citing four historical episodes (three from Iran and one from the Ottoman Empire) in which the interference of the clerics in politics irretrievably harmed the country (*Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* 19–29). He expresses His astonishment at the fact that individuals who “are inept at managing their small homes and nests, and putting their houses in order, and who are uninformed about both themselves and others, interfere in the most important affairs of the country and its people” (*Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih* 29).

Having made His points on this issue clear, it is not surprising to find that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not expect much to be achieved by a political movement in which clerics had a leading role. During the Constitutional Revolution, in addition to disapproving the mode of action, He was also pessimistic about the results of the interference of the ‘ulamá in political matters, as He had mentioned a decade earlier in His *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*. He expressed this concern from the very beginning. In a letter addressed to all of the Bahá’ís of Iran,⁴² dated 23 Jamádiyü’l-Úlá 1324 (15 July 1906), He mentioned hearing that “a number of the Uṣúlí ‘ulamá and Shaykhí divines” were “instigating sedition” (*tahrík-i-fisád*) and had “rebelled” against the government in a fit of “rage and enmity.” He regretted that

the ‘ulamá did not leave the “kind king” alone so that the latter may implement reforms “willingly and by natural inclination” (*bi ṣiráfat-i-ṭab‘ va túb-i-khátir*) (Mílání Collection 135–36). As mentioned earlier, in His response to the letter from Washington, DC, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá joyfully averred that the formation of the *majlis* was in accordance with the explicit text of the Most Holy Book. However, He was quick to add, “Apparently, leaders from the ‘ulamá who love only themselves are involved,” and expressed His doubts that the ‘ulamá were genuinely interested in improving the lives of people and promoting knowledge. At the end, as we saw earlier, He also emphasized obedience to the government (Mílání Collection, 222–23). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed a blatant contradiction between the clergy’s public promotion of progressive ideas and social freedoms and their private lives of circumscription and conservative values: “How can someone who is a promoter of despotism and against freedom in his own home call for constitutionalism and liberty [in society]?” (qtd. in Zarqání 2:105). He also did not trust the motivation of these leaders of the movement: “Iranians did not realize that even though constitutionalism is good, those who are pushing for it are after their own personal interests” (qtd. in Zarqání 2:105).

42 Through a prominent Bahá’í, Jináb-i-Amín (Abu’l-Ḥasan Ardikání).

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ IS WARY OF THE
MACHINATIONS OF THE YAHYÁYÍS
(AZALÍS)

It was not only the leadership of the 'ulamá to the movement that 'Abdu'l-Bahá found problematic; the heavy presence and influence of the Azalís, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh's rival brother, in the movement⁴³ was also a cause of concern. The collaboration between the 'ulamá and Azalís who practiced *taqiyyih* (dissimulation) and presented themselves as Muslims—in some cases as Shí'í clerics—was not a promising one as far as the situation of the Bahá'ís of Iran was concerned, particularly with the memory of the 1903 pogrom still fresh in their minds. In a tablet to the Spiritual Assembly of Tehran, written during the Lesser Despotism, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reveals the extent of the danger posed by the two groups in the first *majlis*:

Consultation is one of the greatest divine institutions, but it must be based on the fear of God and the intention to promote the well-being of all (*khayr-khwáhi-i-'umúmi*). The *majlis*, however, was in the hand of the wicked 'ulama ('ulamá'-i-sú') and the

followers of the unfaithful Yahyá, and [their] goal was utmost oppression and dominance, and they would ultimately have arisen to cut down the Blessed Tree. ("Mílání Collection" 229–30; emphasis added)

In the tablet to Mírzá Aḥmad-i-Qá'iní, which was referred to previously in passing, He recounts His impression about the participation of the Azalís (to whom He always refer by the more accurate epithet "Yahyáyís") in the *majlis*, and the ways in which this could pose a threat to the Bahá'ís. In this tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a summary of His views, insights and predictions from the beginning of the Revolution to the end of the Lesser Despotism, and final defeat of Muḥammad 'Alí Sháh. When He comes to the formation of the first *majlis*, referring to the radical Yahyáyís who found their way in the *majlis*, He says,

Some of the Yahyáyís achieved complete influence (*nufúdh-i-tám*) over the *majlis* and acted seditiously. They caused conflict between the state and the nation up to the point when they became determined to dethrone the king and to instate another person. 'Abdul-Bahá wrote to the Spiritual assembly of Tehran, in explicit terms, that the state will succeed and the *majlis* will be dispersed

43 On the role of the Azalís in the Constitutional Revolution, see Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution*; Amanat, "Memory and Amnesia"; Amini, *Ta'ámul-i-Aqaliyyatháy-i-Madhhabí*.

due to the sinister sedition of the Yahyáyís. (qtd. in *Ishráqkhávarí, Muḥádirát* 3:198; Sulaymání 4:552)

He then continues to say how the Yahyáyís mocked this explicit prediction by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá until the *majlis* was dispersed and the Yahyáyís lost their cause, and could not change the kingship to the person from whom “they had received huge bribes” for the purpose (qtd. in *Ishráqkhávarí, Muḥádirát* 3:198; Sulaymání 4:552).⁴⁴ At the end of this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the choices He made at the beginning of the Revolution had to do with the fact that

the leaders of the nation, due to the machination of the shameless Yahyáyíys, were all against the friends [i.e., the Bahá’ís]. Therefore, if we had mentioned the name of constitutionalism, the government also would have arisen as an enemy. . . . The friends would have been scapegoated (*sharṭu’l-muṣálihíh*) between the two sides. . . . Those on the side of

the government would have started killing, and those on the side of the nation [*millatíyyán*, i.e., the Constitutionalists] also would have assisted. (qtd. in *Ishráqkhávarí, Muḥádirát* 3:200; Sulaymání 4:556)

During the course of the Constitutional Revolution, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us in many of His tablets, Yahyáyís did their best to endanger Bahá’ís by portraying them to each camp as the supporters of their rivals. Before the original victory of constitutionalism, to Royalists they said Bahá’ís were Constitutionalists and later they told the Constitutionalists, now in power, that Bahá’ís were supporting despotism.⁴⁵ In one of His tablets published by Edward Browne in *The Persian Revolution: 1905-1909*, He writes, “Yahyáyí Bábís who are the enemies of Bahá’ís and conceal themselves behind the veils [allusion to the practice of *taqiyyih*], tell the supporters of the nation [*millatíyyán*, the Constitutionalists] that Bahá’ís are supporters of the state, and tell the supporters of the state [i.e., the Royalists] that Bahá’ís sacrifice themselves for the nation” (qtd. in Browne 427). Their goal, He adds, is to instigate both sides against the Bahá’ís and find supporters for themselves (Browne 427). After the formation of different parties and

44 Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that the person who bribed the Yahyáyís to support him was Zillu’s-Sulṭán, the uncle of Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh, and the eldest son of Náṣiri’-d-Dín Sháh (*Ishráqkhávarí, Má’idíy-i-Ásmání*, 5:225–26).

45 See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s description of the situation in *Ishráqkhávarí, Má’idíy-i-Ásmání*, 5:225–26.

during the period of the second *majlis* (inaugurated in 1909), Yahyá'yís likewise alleged that Bahá'ís supported the party opposite to the one in power, at any given time. These “calumniators,” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá laments, “have made their way deep into different groups and do not allow Iran to repose, and do whatever sedition they want” (*Ish-ráqkhávarí, Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:226).

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ IS WORRIED BAHÁ’ÍS
WILL BE SCAPEGOATED

From the beginning of what came to be the Constitutional Revolution, one of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's concerns was that the Bahá'ís in Iran might be scapegoated in the midst of the conflicts, similar to what had occurred during the 1903 pogrom in Isfahan and Yazd and some other parts of Iran, when political rivalries and conflicts provided the ground for scapegoating Bahá'ís, leading to their murder, plunder, and raid by mobs.⁴⁶ Yúnis Khán Afrúkhtih, who was in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's presence at the time, recorded ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's “apprehension” (*tashvish va nigaráni*) in this regard (535). In a tablet revealed some time later to Adíb, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá Himself wrote that at the beginning of the Revolution, when some Bahá'ís did not take His advice of noninterference at face value, interpreted His words

[according to their whims], and partook in the events, He became worried that the government would use their participation as an excuse to scapegoat the Bahá'ís, massacre them, and increase its power and influence in the process (*Mázindaráni, Asráru'l-Áthár* 1:82–83). In another tablet addressed to Mírzá Aḥmad Qá'íní, apparently written after the end of the Lesser Despotism (June 1908–May 1909)⁴⁷ and the restoration of the constitution, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá makes the same point: “at the beginning, in order to protect the friends we showed forbearance (*mudará kardím*)” (qtd. in *Muḥáḍirát* 3:200; Sulaymání 4:556).⁴⁸ Yúnis

47 On the period of the Lesser Despotism, see Browne 196–292; Bayat 232–60; Afary 209–54.

48 Touraj Amini, in his otherwise precise work, dates this tablet to the Lesser Despotism (which suggests a very different context, hence understanding) (Amini, *Ta'ámul-i-Aqaliyyatháy-i-Madhhabí* 37). The content of the tablet, however, makes it clear that, as mentioned above, it was written after the defeat of Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh, end of the Lesser Despotism, and at beginning of the second Constitutional period. In what can be regarded as an overview of His guidance during the different stages of the Constitutional period, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá mentions how, during the period when Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh was defeating his opponents in *majlis* (i.e., during the Lesser Despotism), He advised the Sháh in writing to act justly and punish

46 On 1903 pogrom, see Yazdani, “Religious Contentions,” 75–102.

Khán also records that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told him that had He not prevented the friends from interfering, not only would they have been massacred, but constitutionalism would have failed (*mujrá nimíshud*) (536). While, of course, an analysis of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Iranian Constitutional Revolution at this point has to be taken into account, its significance should not overshadow the importance of other factors mentioned earlier. In other words, in light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s general guidance on the interaction with the government and His assessment of the situation, it is safe to assume that had danger not been threatening the lives of Bahá’ís, He would have encouraged Bahá’ís to take part, but only within the parameters established in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings and His own tablets.

the oppressors in order for his government to be assisted by God. Otherwise, the confirmation of God would be cut off. When the Sháh failed to heed His advice, badá [change in God’s decree] occurred” (qtd. in *Ishráqkhávarí*, *Muhádirát* 3:198–99; *Sulaymání* 4:553–55). His words obviously imply that Muḥammad ‘Alí had already been deposed. The same theme is found in other tablets and records of His speeches (*Ishráqkhávarí*, *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:46; *idem*, *Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 9:98; *idem*, *Muhádirát* 3:197; *Zarqání* 1:168).

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ BELIEVED IRANIANS
NEEDED TO BE FIRST PREPARED FOR
CONSTITUTIONALISM

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oral statements regarding the Iranian Constitutional Revolution also indicate that He thought some cultural preparation, particularly at the moral-ethical level—that pertaining to the realm of values—was necessary for constitutionalism to have a healthy, lasting life in Iran. The chronicler of His journeys in the West recorded His comments that Iranians “should, at least, pay attention to the history of the civilized nations,” and then gave the example of France, where first a government based on law was established so that under the rule of law that nation acquires the capacity for progress. Iranians, He added, by virtue of their inexperience and their ignorance of the rule of law (*az qanún bí khabar*), were not ready for the “protection” (*muháfizih*) and “promulgation” (*tarvíj*) of the constitutional government (*Zarqání* 2:104–5). He asserted that “a change in the conduct of people” was needed “for the capacity for constitutionalism . . . to be acquired” (*Zarqání* 2:29).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to the “civilized nations” should not be misunderstood. Commenting on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution elsewhere, He is reported to have said about the revolutionaries that their quest for “civilization” (*madaníyyat*) was good, provided that it was based

on “heavenly character” (*akhláq-i-raḥmání*). “Material civilization” that was about “cannons,” “guns,” and “the means of destruction” was not real civilization. He asserted, “If there is divine civilization, naturally there will be material civilization as well.” Then He made it clear what He meant by “divine civilization.” He recounted the story of the trustworthiness of a sixth-century Arab Jew in Syria who, in his resolve to protect that which the poet Imru'l-Qays had entrusted with him, resisted the local ruler who wanted to take Imru'l-Qays's property, to the extent that his own son was killed in the struggle. Having recounted this story, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserted, “now, in which part of Europe can one find such a civilization?” (Mu'ayyad 1:50–51). What 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw as necessary, therefore, was first and foremost a change at the level of values. This is much in line with Adíb's advice to his constitutionalist friends mentioned earlier, which makes one think the former in his communications with the latter was, in fact, conveying 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance.

For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the real change of moral-ethical character would come as a result of spiritual rejuvenation. It is in this light that one must see 'Abdu'l-Bahá's plan for sending the Bahá'í scholar Asadu'lláh Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání (d. 1957)⁴⁹ to Mullá

Muḥammad Kázim-i-Kḥurásání (d. 1911),⁵⁰ one of the three high-ranking Najaf-residing Shí'í clerics supportive of constitutionalism, during the time of the second *majlis*.⁵¹ In at least two tablets both addressed to the Hand of the Cause Muḥammad Taqí Ibn Abhar,⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá ordered that Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání be sent to Najaf to meet with Kḥurásání. He gave detailed instructions on how Fáḍil had to behave in the expected meeting: respectful and wise. The message to be given to the high-ranking cleric was, in fact, an invitation to accept the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh as the only remedy to the materialistic trend! Fáḍil was to tell him that clearly the power of the 'ulamá was in decline. All the people were going to become “Europeanized” (*Urúpa-mašḥrab*) and be primarily concerned with “the prosperity of this world” (*ásáyish-i-ín jahán*), and in a short time religion would be forgotten as had happened in Europe, unless the hearts and souls be revived and freed by “the breaths of the Holy Spirit” and “a new dispensation appears” (Mázindarání, *Zuhúru'l-Ḥaqq*

50 See Hairí, Murata, “Aḳúnd Ḳorásání.”

51 On this period, see Afary 255–83. The second Constitutional Period started with the inauguration of the second *majlis* in November 1909 and ended with its closure in late December 1911.

52 See Lambden, “Ebn Abhar, Moḥammad-Taḳī.”

49 On Fáḍil Mázindarání, see Momen, “Fāẓel Mázandarānī, Mūrẓā Asad-Allāh.”

8/2:829–30). The old path was not capable of resisting the flood of irreligion, as attested by the increasing number of people who were becoming “totally alien to religion.” Only the power of the Word of God and the “new creation” (*khalq-i-jadíd*) can resist this storm (Sulaymání 5:80–81). Unfortunately, Fáḍíl was never able to meet *Khurásání*, even though he left for Najaf around Jamádíyu'l-Úlá 1328 (May–June 1910) along with a friend of his. In the first few days after their arrival in Najaf, they were arrested, interrogated, and returned to Iran. Their arrest and return occurred as a result of the machinations of the *Yaḥyáyís*, who were connected with the Najaf Constitutionalists, one of them being the son of *Ákhúnd-i-Khurásání*. They had forged a tablet in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had ordered Bahá’ís to assist the overthrown and deposed Muḥammad ‘Alí *Shah*, and Sultán ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd, and claimed that this “tablet” had been found in the baggage of the two travelers. An interesting point, though, is that after the travelers reached Iran, one of the factors that assisted their release from jail was the telegram *Ákhúnd-i-Khurásání* sent to the Iranian government asserting that Fáḍíl and his friend had had no ill intentions, and their aim in traveling to Najaf had only been “to guide and summon to their religious beliefs” (*Mázindarání, Zuhuru’l-Haqq*, 8/2:830–40).

CONCLUSION

History is about change over time, but change makes sense only if there is continuity, as well. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response to the change that was happening in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution had a continuity, that is, acting within the framework established by Bahá’u’lláh, at the center of which was a belief in the power of discourse to change sociopolitical conditions and to reject violence as a means of sociopolitical ends. Based on the documents available so far, this narrative can be put forth with regard to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. From the beginning of the movement in 1906, He was concerned with the possibility of Bahá’ís being again scapegoated and massacred in the midst of the political conflicts, as had occurred in 1903. Also, based on the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, He did not approve a confrontational attitude toward the government as a way of seeking political ends, even (or maybe particularly) with a cause as sublime as constitutionalism. In fact, as demonstrated by the passages from Bahá’u’lláh quoted earlier, the principles of obedience to one’s government and non-involvement in partisan politics are both rooted in His own writings, and were not instituted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Requests for the establishment of constitutionalism, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá believed, had to be

posed in a peaceful way. This explains why there is no evidence of Him having “supported” the movement in its early phase in 1906. His numerous tablets in 1907, calling on the friends to reconcile the two sides of the conflict (the court and the *majlis*) and to withdraw if unsuccessful, should be considered, therefore, merely as a more emphatic reiteration of the same guidance as before, made necessary as the conflicts between the two sides aggravated.

Again, based on ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s own tablets, the majority of Bahá’ís followed His orders and remained impartial. The cases of Bahá’ís joining the activities of the Constitutionalists should be regarded, therefore, as exceptions to the rule. It can be said that Adíbu'l-‘Ulamá’s attitude, described earlier in this article, wraps up the general Bahá’í attitude toward the Constitutional Movement: sympathy for the legitimate demands of the people but choosing to act toward a long-term, fundamental change according to the Bahá’í teachings, for example, through education.

While rejecting confrontational and violent sociopolitical action, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá did take part in social action by both propagating His guidance in the *Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih*, through His attempts, both publicly and secretly, to reconcile the two sides of the conflict, and by ordering Bahá’ís to promote unity and abstain from violence.

Also of great importance was His serious concern for the integrity and

independence of the country and His warning against the increasing danger of the encroachments from the neighboring states (Russia in the north and Britain from the South), should the two sides not reconcile. Sadly, the course of history only proved the validity of His concerns.

In addition to disapproving the mode of action of the Constitutionalists, there were two other factors that caused Him to be suspicious of the movement: the leadership of the clerics, which He saw as detrimental to any political cause, and the deep involvement of the Yaḥyáyis, who had every intention to inflict harm upon the Bahá’ís. The joint collaboration of these two groups only increased His worry about the possibility of Bahá’ís being scapegoated. Had there not been such a fear, He might have taken another path, but, we can be certain, it would have been compatible with the violence-renouncing Bahá’í ethos in supporting the nation’s quest for constitutionalism, as His remarks at the end of the Lesser Despotism imply.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s instruction to send the Hands of the Cause to the *majlis* as representatives of the Bahá’í community sheds light on the relationship between the principle of obedience to the legal government of time and the policy of noninterference in partisan politics as its corollary. After the establishment of the second *majlis*, once the Constitutional government was the established, legal government with no

conflicts between the *majlis* and the Court, requesting membership in the parliament as representatives of a religious minority was fully compatible with the principle of obedience to the government.

For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, real change for Iran, as elsewhere, would come through a spiritual rejuvenation of people through the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. The content of the message He sought to convey to the lead constitutionalist cleric in Najaf clearly illustrates this point. Using metaphoric language in one of the tablets of the Constitutional Period, He expressed—in a nutshell—what can be regarded as the philosophy behind the Bahá’í principle of noninvolvement in partisan politics:

He who seeks to promote universal peace and serve the world of humanity does not involve himself in a conflict waging in one corner of the world. He who works to revive a nation does not fight with the peasant in some village over the affairs of a farm. Once the country flourishes, every farm will be revived and every desolate land will prosper. (*Ishráqkhávarí, Má’idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:65)

Meanwhile, in the long and gradual transitional process between the current stage of the world and the Golden Age of Bahá’u’lláh (what Bahá’ís call the processes of the Lesser Peace), Bahá’ís

are charged to work for the betterment of people’s lives and to create a more just society—in ways and methods compatible with Bahá’í ethos—much as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did in His attempt to reconcile between the *majlis* and the Court. This can also be thought of as the essence of the 2 March 2013 letter of the Universal House of Justice elucidating the Bahá’í attitude toward politics. Having expounded the Bahá’í view of history and the dimensions of the contribution of Bahá’í community to the civilization building process, the Universal House of Justice encourages the Bahá’í to collaborate with others “to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity.” Meanwhile, they remind the reader of the principle in the Bahá’í teachings “that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means.” A practical case of acting according to such guidance from the Universal House of Justice happened a couple years earlier than this message. The open letter written by the Bahá’ís of Egypt to the people of that country, in April 2011, seems to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example and can in turn be regarded as the proper contemporary model for the contribution of Bahá’ís to social change elsewhere (The Bahá’ís of Egypt n. pag.).⁵³ In this letter, Egypt’s

53 This framework calls to mind what legal scholar Lessig calls social

Bahá'í community calls for achieving “consensus on the operating principles that are to shape a new model” for their society. Once this agreement is reached, they suggest that “the policies that follow are more likely to attract the support of the population whom they affect.” In their discussion of principles, they assert, “A mature society demonstrates one feature above all else: a recognition of oneness of all humanity. Far from being an expression of vague and pious hope, this principle informs the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family.” The acceptance of this principle, they emphasize, “would require an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change with far-reaching consequences for every aspect of our collective life.” They suggest initiating “a process of consultation about the principles that are to inform the reshaping” of their society:

In such a broadly based national conversation—engaging people at all levels, in villages and in cities, in neighborhoods and in the home, extending to the grassroots

of society and drawing in every concerned citizen—it will be vital that the process not move too quickly to the pragmatic and the expedient, and not be reduced to the deals and decisions involved in the distribution of power among a new elite who would presume to become the arbiters of our future. (The Bahá'ís of Egypt n. pag.)

change at the level of “meanings,” and what Roshan Danesh has convincingly applied to the context of Bahá'í contribution to social change at the initial level. See Roshan Danesh and Lex Musta, “Some Reflections on Bahá'í Approaches to Social Change.”

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