

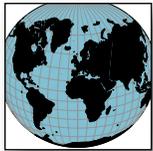


ONE COUNTRY

“The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” – Bahá’u’lláh

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Newsletter of the Bahá’í
International Community
April-June 2008
Volume 19, Issue 3



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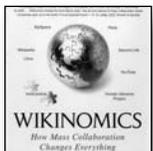
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More than 1,000 delegates from 153 countries, using a distinctive democratic electoral process, gather to elect the international governing body of the Bahá’í Faith



A delegate casts her vote at the International Bahá’í Convention on 29 April 2008.

HAIFA, Israel — For nearly three hours on 29 April 2008, more than 1,000 people from 153 countries filed decorously onto a stage in this Holy Land municipality and, one by one, dropped ballots into a simple wooden box.

Many wore national costumes, contributing to an event that showcased the global diversity of the worldwide Bahá’í community — along with a high-minded spiritual dignity.

The result was the election of nine individuals from wide-ranging backgrounds to serve as the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá’í Faith.

The newly elected are an Iranian-born physicist who specialized in development in Colombia, an African-American law professor, an agronomist who worked some 27 years in Africa, an Australian-born electrical engineer of South Asian descent, an accomplished painter and former Hollywood actor who spent many years in Nicaragua, a Colombian mathematician, an American educator, a psychologist from India, and a business consultant from London.

While the specific outcome is likely to be of concern mainly to the worldwide Bahá’í community of some 5 million people, the event and the processes behind it were nevertheless noteworthy as a study in how to conduct a global election that is free, democratic, and transparent.

The balloting reflected a unique election process that emphasizes qualifications over promises, and inclusiveness over money or other barriers to office.

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Crossing the divide between science and religion: a view on evolution

Many people today question the place of religion in an age of science. This is understandable: the extraordinary success of the scientific method at providing a nearly seamless explanatory framework for the physical world has acutely challenged traditional religious beliefs.

Perhaps nowhere is this challenge more apparent than in the theory of evolution. For some, evolution is the ultimate scientific theory: simple, powerful, and elegant, it offers an explanation of the great mystery of how life, order, and complexity can arise from lifelessness and chaos. For others, evolution threatens to undermine deeply held beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life: it pushes the Creator from the cosmic stage, replacing a universe suffused with meaning with one that is cold, pitiless, and utterly indifferent to human suffering.

For many thoughtful people, believers or not, neither extreme seems adequate. They intuitively understand that there ought to be no contradiction in both embracing the theory of evolution and holding the conviction that human life has a higher origin and a larger purpose than the mere struggle for survival.

Yet coming to a satisfactory resolution of the tension between those two ideas cannot rationally take place without a seismic shift in perspective.

And it is in the Bahá'í writings that one finds just such a perspective, one that both embraces the scientific truth behind evolution and yet also upholds the Divine nature behind ultimate reality.

The starting point for Bahá'ís is the rejection of the excessive emphasis on received wisdom, accompanied by the striving to see the truth with one's own eyes and the willingness to acknowledge the limitations of one's deepest assumptions. "Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things," Bahá'u'lláh stated. "That is, whatever he hath seen, and heard, and understood, all must he set at naught..."

Closely allied to such a commitment to the unfettered investigation of reality is the

conviction that, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "religion and reason are the same; they cannot be separated from each other." Since reality is one, and the truth cannot contradict itself, it follows not only that religious belief must be in harmony with scientific fact, but that "if religion does not agree with science, it is superstition and ignorance."

These ideas prepare the ground for addressing a central issue that lies behind the debate about evolution, and that indeed extends to every front in the conflict between science and religion: how can the idea of an active Creator, who continually cares for and occasionally intervenes in His creation, be reconciled with the idea of a world whose workings can be traced in every detail to the operation of fixed mathematical laws?

The problem, according to the Bahá'í Writings, is that human language is an inadequate tool to describe ultimate reality and that the mind is an inadequate tool to comprehend it.

"That which we imagine is not the reality of God," wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "He, the unknowable, the unthinkable, is far beyond the highest conception of man." If God is beyond our highest thoughts, then the language that describes God's existence, His design of the universe, and His intervention in human history, however powerful and evocative, must in the end fall short of the reality, like the proverbial finger pointing at the moon.

But if human thought cannot touch ultimate reality then what possible relevance does that reality have to the world? While inaccessible in its essence, traces of it can be discerned in what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has called "the book of creation" and "the written book."

The first "book" is nature, which expresses the purpose of the unknowable essence as it unfolds in endless patterns in the observable universe. As Bahá'u'lláh stated, "Nature is God's will and is its expression in and through the contingent world."

The second "book" is revelation, by which is meant not a static and arbitrary set of doctrines delivered to mankind in finished

form, but that progressive and dynamic power, conveyed through the written word, that has transformed human consciousness throughout the ages and which draws individuals out of the narrow confines of their own self-interest into ever-widening circles of regard for others.

This book of revelation has expressed itself through the succession of manifestations of God — Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and, most recently, Bahá'u'lláh — that have given to humanity the sacred scriptures of the world's independent religious systems.

How are such considerations useful in the context of the evolution debate?

First of all, and independently of the compelling evidence of the fossil record, the Bahá'í concept of the world is at its core both organic and evolutionary. Nature and religion are defined in virtually identical terms in the Bahá'í Writings as “the essential connection” inherent in “the realities of things.” So the two “books” are both inextricable parts of a single evolutionary story which begins with the first primitive cell and culminates with the emergence of global consciousness.

But traditional religious beliefs, including the Bahá'í teachings, emphatically uphold the uniqueness of man and his special destiny. How can this perspective, which sets man apart from the animal and which implies that evolution has a predetermined course, be reconciled with the undeniable fact of common descent and with the apparently blind forces of chance mutation and natural selection?

A metaphor drawn from the Bahá'í Writings may offer a solution. In them, man is referred to as the “fruit” on the “tree” of existence. By implication, the other plant and animal species can be likened to the other parts of the tree: leaves, roots, bark, and so forth. Each part shares common descent from one seed and becomes differentiated in time. Last to appear is the fruit, which existed in potential from the beginning — and in this sense it was always the fruit, never leaf or root or bark. As Shoghi Effendi stated, “man was always potentially man, which is just another way of saying the Cause contains the power to produce the effect; in this planned and integrated universe, he was part of the plan from the beginning, so to speak.”

In the growth of a physical tree, as in the development of the evolutionary tree, chance can play a major role. The chaotic forces of wind and weather can greatly alter the course of the tree's development, and entire branches

may even be broken off in a storm — as suggested in the case of evolution on Earth by the sudden extinction of the dinosaurs. There is no way to predict in every detail the final shape of the tree, or on which branches the first fruits will appear. What is certain is that if the tree survives to maturity, somewhere the fruit will appear — that fruit being not the physical form of man but that power of self-awareness which is capable of pondering the mystery and meaning of its own emergence.

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian famously asked at the end of the second century of the Christian era, alluding to the dissonance which existed even then between the secular and the sacred views of reality. Some eighteen centuries later, the Bahá'í teachings offer this answer: there has ever been only one city, which has been viewed from different perspectives — as those who explore its twisted alleys and dead-end streets on foot and those who fly over in an airplane and see the larger pattern that it embodies.

Such an organic conception of the emergence of human life need not imply — as in some versions of so-called “intelligent design” theory — that the blueprint of life was fixed at the beginning. It does predict that, throughout the universe, and wherever conditions permit, life and consciousness will be emergent tendencies of matter.

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian famously asked at the end of the second century of the Christian era, alluding to the dissonance which existed even then between the secular and the sacred views of reality. Some eighteen centuries later, the Bahá'í teachings offer this answer: there has ever been only one city, which has been viewed from different perspectives — as those who explore its twisted alleys and dead-end streets on foot and those who fly over in an airplane and see the larger pattern that it embodies. *

— by Steven Phelps

Women's equality can improve economic performance, economist tells the UN

The 2008 UN Commission on the Status of Women examined the theme "financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women."

UNITED NATIONS — Equality between the sexes can have a real world economic effect, potentially improving the economic performance of nations and corporations.

That was among the ideas offered by noted economist Augusto Lopez-Claros, speaking in February at the United Nations on behalf of the Bahá'í International Community.

Dr. Lopez-Claros, director of the Global Competitiveness Report 2006/2007 at the World Economic Forum, addressed the UN Commission on the Status of Women at a High-Level Roundtable on "Financing for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women" on 25 February 2008.

"The efficient operation of our increasingly knowledge-based economy is not only a function of adequate levels of available finance, a reasonably open trade regime for goods and services, but, more and more, is also dependent on our ability to tap into a society's reservoir of

talents and skills," said Dr. Lopez-Claros.

"When, because of tradition, a misunderstanding of the purpose of religion, social taboos or plain prejudices, half (the) ... population is prevented from making its contribution to the life of a nation, the economy will suffer."

Dr. Lopez-Claros was one of some 40 Bahá'í delegates to the meeting of the Commission, which ran this year from 25 February to 7 March.

This year's focus on money was reflected in the Commission's outcome document, which stressed the importance of matching verbal commitments with financial resources in the global effort to advance the equality of women with men.

After reaffirming the various commitments to providing adequate financial resources, the Commission said several areas require special attention, including "the growing feminization of poverty," "lingering negative consequences, including for women, of structural adjustment programs," and "the under-resourcing in the area of gender equality in the United Nations system."

"The Commission states that the global commitments for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women since the Fourth World Conference on Women, including through the Monterrey Consensus, have yet to be fully implemented," said the outcome document.

The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) addressed issues related to financing and the advancement of women during the Commission by organizing or co-sponsoring a number of side events, issuing a statement, and holding face-to-face discussions with delegates.

"One of our goals was to bring forward a perspective that the lack of financial resources for women's advancement in the world stems in part because of traditional beliefs and cultural practices that make women less visible in the decision-making structures of governments and businesses," said Fulya Vekiloglu,



Augusto Lopez-Claros, left, at a High-Level Roundtable on "Financing for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women" on 25 February 2008. At center is Fulya Vekiloglu, a Bahá'í International Community representative to the UN.

a BIC representative to the UN.

In particular, Ms. Vekiloglu noted, the BIC issued a statement to the Commission that addressed the cultural and religious dimensions of the gender gap, connecting gender disparities to issues of financing.

The statement, “Mobilizing Institutional, Legal and Cultural Resources to Achieve Gender Equality,” recommended the adoption of a long-term perspective to guide short and medium-term efforts to finance gender equality, the use of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to evaluate national budgets, and the engagement of religious perspectives and institutions.

“Too often, policy makers have been resistant to addressing the cultural and religious dimensions of attitudes governing the treatment of women — fearing the potentially divisive nature of such an undertaking or lacking knowledge about whom to address and how to proceed,” the statement said. “Yet the achievement of gender equality has been painstakingly slow precisely because questions about the roles and responsibilities of women challenge some of the most deeply entrenched human attitudes. Given the tremendous capacity of religion to influence the masses — both to inspire and to vilify — governments cannot afford to turn a blind eye.”

Side events organized or co-sponsored by the BIC during the Commission included:

- “Empowering Women through Meaningful Work,” a panel discussion that examined the various motivations women have for playing an active role in the workplace, aside from answering basic needs. The panelists also looked at the effects that discrimination has not only on women themselves but also on their families and communities. It was co-sponsored with the European Bahá’í Business Forum (EBBF) and the UK National Committee of the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM-UK).

- “Business Empowers Women? Who Adapts to Whom?,” a workshop co-sponsored with the EBBF that featured business leaders from different sectors and different countries who discussed the situation for women in business in their countries.

- “Global Issues, Local Voices: the Role of NGOs in Building Sustainable Capacity,” a meeting that considered ways that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be influential in holding governments accountable for the international agreements



they commit to at the United Nations. The event was supported by FATIMA Women’s Network, the National Alliance of Women’s Organizations, and UNIFEM-UK.

Importance of the girl child

“In Beijing, three words changed the lives of millions of people,” said Zarin Hainsworth, director of UNIFEM-UK, at that workshop, discussing the impact of international agreements. “Those three words — the girl child — changed our ability to work for the special needs of girls.”

Ms. Vekiloglu, who is co-chair of the Working Group on Girls of the NGO Committee on UNICEF, also addressed the 25 February High-Level Roundtable. She likewise stressed the importance of girls.

She urged the commission to make a greater effort to promote social policies that protect, empower, and “invest in” girls at the national and local levels.

“Investments in girls have amazing cascading benefits,” said Ms. Vekiloglu. “When girls are healthy, well-educated and empowered to contribute to their families and societies, we all benefit.”

She also urged the commission to promote policies that would help provide better data about women and girls.

“In too many places and at too many times, girls continue to be invisible, lumped together with women by some and with children by others,” said Ms. Vekiloglu. “Gender equality and women’s empowerment cannot be accomplished unless we adopt a life-cycle approach to this critical issue. Unless we ensure the visibility of girls, we can never guarantee women’s rights.” *

Bahá’í International Community delegates to the Commission on the Status of Women included men and women from 15 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, El Salvador, France, Germany, India, Japan, Malawi, Mauritius, Nepal, Sweden, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

“When, because of tradition, a misunderstanding of the purpose of religion, social taboos or plain prejudices, half the population is prevented from making its contribution to the life of a nation, the economy will suffer.”

– Augusto Lopez-Claros, director, Global Competitiveness Report 2006/2007

At the UN, a discussion of poverty, employment, and the meaning of work

In its contributions to the 2008 UN Commission on Social Development, the Bahá'í International Community focused on an integrated approach to work and employment issues.

UNITED NATIONS — The Bahá'í International Community issued two statements, one on poverty and one on employment and work, and helped to organize a panel discussion on youth and employment at the UN Commission on Social Development in February.

The statement on poverty, “Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One,” calls for a coherent, principle-based approach to the eradication of global poverty.

It was introduced at a luncheon on 14 February 2008 during the Commission at the BIC offices in New York.

“This year, the Commission is focusing on the themes of promoting full employment and decent work for all,” said Tahirih Naylor, a BIC representative to the UN, who also served as one of the coordinators for the Civil Society Forum during the Commis-

sion. “These are important aspects of poverty eradication, but we wanted to advocate a more coherent approach, one that looks at the wide range of issues that must be addressed in an integrated way if global poverty is to be eliminated.”

The statement, which was published in edited form in the last issue of *ONE COUNTRY* as a Perspective editorial, calls on institutions and individuals internationally to put essential moral principles, such as unity and justice, first. It recasts the underlying nature of poverty, saying it “can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.”

The BIC also issued a shorter, more focused statement on “Full Employment and Decent Work,” addressing directly the main theme of this year’s Commission meeting.

That statement urged policy makers to recognize that the conception of work should “transcend” economics, encompassing also the “the human and social purpose that employment fulfills.”

“Work needs to be seen not only as a means to securing an individual and family’s basic needs, but also as a channel to developing one’s craft, refining one’s character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society. Work, no matter how humble and simple, when performed with an attitude of service, is a means to contribute to the advancement of our communities, countries and global society,” the statement said.

In addition, the BIC helped organize an interactive discussion at the UN on “Full Employment and Decent Work for All: Where are the Youth?”

Co-sponsored by the BIC with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Christian Children’s Fund, the 8 February event explored the issues relating to youth employment from the per-



Among those present at the 14 February 2008 presentation of the statement “Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One” were, from left, Bani Dugal, principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations; Nikhil Seth, director of the UN Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination; Julia Berger, senior researcher and writer at the BIC; and Tahirih Naylor, a BIC representative to the UN.

spectives of government, civil society, and the International Labor Organization (ILO).

The panelists included Mario Barbosa of Brazil's Ministry of Work and Employment, Elena Gastaldo of the ILO, Devorah J. Miller of the Christian Children's Fund, and Neissan Alessandro Besharati of the Bahá'í International Community.

Ms. Barbosa of Brazil said the youth were facing the same unemployment problems as everyone else, which is why employment needs to be put at the top of policy-making priorities. She cited the example of Argentina to illustrate the unfortunate fact that a country's economic growth doesn't necessarily support employment growth.

Ms. Gastaldo discussed the difficulties young people face entering the labor market, noting that while employers are often eager to provide opportunities for youth, these jobs are often limited in time and scope, of lower wages, or don't lead to substantive future work. "They do not receive the employment protection they deserve," Ms. Gastaldo said. "They're not really considered full-fledged employees."

She recommended an integrated approach, enlisting not just the ministries of youth, but also ministries of finance, labor, health, and other relevant departments.

Devorah Miller of the Christian Chil-

dren's Fund stressed the need for young people to complete their education. "Youth need to be trained. They need to be given the skills to do the jobs that are available in the marketplace," she said. After-school work opportunities need to be provided so that they are not forced to choose between getting a job and going to school. This is particularly important for youth heads-of-household, who represent a growing vulnerable population due to the prevalence of AIDS and in areas of armed conflict.

A particular focus of Mr. Besharati's presentation was youth in conflict situations. Employment is important, he said, so youth do not fall prey to warlords, terrorist indoctrination, drugs, crime, or becoming a child soldier. "Unemployment among youth in conflict areas causes instability among adults," he said.

Multiple strategies are needed, said Mr. Besharati, to make sure youth find decent employment. In a rapidly advancing job market, education and skills are essential, he said, as well as early opportunities to participate in the job market even if it is an unpaid position, just to provide an introduction to a particular field or industry. "The private sector could take a larger role in training," he said. "Learning doesn't have to be in the classroom; it could be on the job." *

"Work needs to be seen not only as a means to securing an individual and family's basic needs, but also as a channel to developing one's craft, refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society."

— Bahá'í International Community

HUMAN RIGHTS

In Egypt, the government decides not to appeal Bahá'í decision in religious freedom cases

CAIRO, Egypt — The Egyptian government has decided not to appeal a lower administrative court ruling that cleared the way for Bahá'ís to obtain proper identification papers.

On 29 January 2008, the Court of Administrative Justice in Cairo upheld arguments made in two cases concerning Bahá'ís who had sought to restore their full citizenship rights by asking that they be allowed to leave the religious affiliation field blank on official documents.

The deadline for an appeal passed 60 days later, and Egyptian news media reported that the government had decided not to appeal the case, but rather will strive to implement the court's decision, clearing the way for Egyptian Bahá'ís to obtain official identification cards and other documents.

"We are grateful for the government's decision not to appeal the lower court decision, which came as a much welcomed

event for Egyptian Bahá'ís and others who are concerned about religious freedom," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. "Our hope now is that the government will work to implement the court's decision without delay."

Before the lower court's decision, the government required all identification papers to list religious affiliation but restricted the choice to the three officially recognized religions — Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Bahá'ís were thus unable to obtain identification papers because they refuse to lie about their religious affiliation.

Without national identity cards, Bahá'ís and others caught in the law's contradictory requirements were deprived of a wide range of citizenship rights, such as access to employment, education, and medical and financial services. *

In Iran, new anti-Bahá'í tactics come amidst surprising pockets of support

Iranian Bahá'ís are facing a wave of escalating violence from the government — and at the same time are discovering surprising pockets of support among the population.

Seven Iranian Bahá'í leaders who were arrested in spring 2008 had posed together earlier for a photograph. Seated from left, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie, and, standing, Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet. All are from Tehran.



GENEVA — Last March, after being threatened twice, once by anti-Bahá'í graffiti at his workplace and then by a hate-filled letter, a 53-year-old Bahá'í businessman in Shiraz, Iran, was chained to a tree, doused with gasoline, and assaulted by an unknown assailant who threw lighted matches at him.

Fortuitously, none of the four matches that were tossed at the man ignited the deadly fuel. The first failed to light, the second went out immediately, a third hit his clothes but did not spark the gas, and a fourth fell harmless to the ground. At that point, the assailants — apparently nervous — jumped back in their car and fled, shortly before neighbors arrived and freed the victim.

The entire incident, from the extreme nature of its assault to the neighborly rescue, offers a striking glimpse of the general situation facing Iranian Bahá'ís today as they strive to practice their religious beliefs in the land where their religion was born.

In recent months, Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community has faced a wave of escalating violence — and at the same time found surprising pockets of support among the population.

The violence and harassment comes with the obvious blessing of the government, which has fueled hatred against Bahá'ís in re-

cent years with a defamatory campaign in the state-sponsored news media — and through outright religious discrimination in schools, the workplace, and the courts.

The government has acted directly against Bahá'ís as well, through stepped up arrests, detentions, interrogations and harassment, principally by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence.

These agents also often act in disguise — or on orders or court judgments that are kept secret, said Diane Ala'i, a representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the UN, who closely monitors the situation in Iran.

“What Iranian Bahá'ís are facing is a kind of institutionalized ‘plainclothes’ violence — barely disguised attacks by government agents and their proxies, hoping to make the outside world think it is the people of Iran that are rising up against Bahá'ís,” said Ms. Ala'i.

“The obvious aim is to allow the government to distance itself from international condemnation for its treatment of Bahá'ís, by claiming that they can't help it if the people themselves feel prejudice against them.

“No doubt there are some individuals who believe the government's lies about Bahá'ís, and have been moved to act — such as perhaps those who doused the Bahá'í with gasoline in Shiraz.

“However, alongside stories of harassment, persecution and oppression, we are also receiving reports that tell how ordinary Iranian citizens are rejecting the propaganda of their government and, instead, offering various kinds of support to their Bahá'í friends and neighbors,” said Ms. Ala'i. “In some cases, even government officials, judges and others have stood up for Bahá'ís.”

The most recent example of such support came recently when Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri issued a decree saying that Bahá'ís have the right of citizenship and should be treated with “Islamic compassion,” even if they are not recognized as an official religious minority, as are Christians and Jews.

Ayatollah Montazeri was one of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and for a time was the designated successor to the former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. He has more recently been identified with

those seeking reform.

Despite such events, the government campaign against Bahá'ís is severe and escalating.

Seven leaders arrested

The most notable example was the recent arrests of seven Bahá'í leaders, which received extensive attention in the international news media. The entire group of men and women who help see to the minimum needs of the Bahá'í community of Iran were arrested in two steps, in March and then May, in a sweep ominously similar to episodes in the 1980s when scores of Iranian Bahá'í leaders were rounded up and killed.

As of this writing, all seven remain in prison, with no access to lawyers and no formal charges against them — although a government spokesperson told the news media in late May that they were being held for “security reasons.”

Such “allegations are not new, and the Iranian government knows well that they are untrue,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the BIC to the UN, adding that those arrested, “like the thousands of Bahá'ís who since 1979 have been killed, imprisoned, or otherwise oppressed, are being persecuted solely because of their religious beliefs.”

Other attacks on Iranian Bahá'ís in recent months include:

- On 8 September 2007 a number of Bahá'í homes in Vilashahr were defaced with graffiti that stated “unclean Bahá'ís, stipendiaries of Israel,” “Bahá'ís are enemies of God”, and “Bahá'ís are traitors to their country.”

- Between 18 November 2007 and 10 January 2008, the government-backed *Kayhan* newspaper published a series of 40 articles about the Bahá'ís in pre-revolutionary Iran, portraying the community as a powerful and wealthy group that was bent on undermining the teachings of Islam. In these articles Bahá'ís are described as cruel and dishonest, ruthless in business, tax-evaders, of dissolute character, involved in drugs, and long known as looters and murders. Among other wholly unfounded allegations in these articles is that the Bahá'ís are part of a political movement against Islam that introduced western ideologies to Iran.

- On 28 December 2007, officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards entered four Bahá'í homes in Shiraz, searching and seizing Bahá'í books and materials. The secretary of the local group that coordinates the affairs of the Bahá'í community there was arrested and taken into custody, where she was inter-

rogated several times by agents using a high intensity light and video or film recording equipment. She was released on 10 January 2008 on the equivalent of \$11,000 bail.

Although the figure changes almost daily, at last count there were more than 20 Bahá'ís in prison in Iran. More than 70 are out on bail and awaiting trial on various charges, all related to their religious belief. At least 75 others are free pending an appeal or a summons to serve their sentence.

At the same time, however, as with the declaration by Ayatollah Monterzi, a few segments of the population have clearly rejected the government's campaign against Bahá'ís.

On 15 March 2008, the appeal court of the Province of Hamadan overturned guilty verdicts against four Bahá'ís from that city who had been arrested and then found guilty by a lower court on charges of “teaching against the regime.” The appeals court ruled that not only are Bahá'ís not against the government, but they are also absolutely obedient to it and that teaching the Bahá'í Faith cannot be regarded as teaching against the regime.

Similarly, on 26 September 2007 the Semnan Court of Appeal overturned the conviction of a Bahá'í who had been sentenced to four months' imprisonment on a charge of anti-regime activity by distributing the 15 November 2004 letter from the Bahá'í community of Iran to then President Mohammad Khatami. The Court of Appeal found that the letter “was in fact a way of petitioning and conveying an expression of the situation and treatment of the Bahá'ís” with no “intention to protest against or defame the regime.”

Ordinary Iranians, as well, have recently shown support for Bahá'ís in a number of incidents. In January, for example, after a Bahá'í family was attacked in Abadeh by the paramilitary Basij Resistance Force, friends and neighbors gave shelter, expressed sympathy and even offered to compensate for damage.

The incident began when the Basij closed the entrance leading to a Bahá'í home owned in Abadeh and drove a bulldozer into it, demolishing a wall. Twenty Basij personnel, whose faces were covered, raided and ransacked the house. The women and children who were in the house fled in terror, taking refuge in the homes of neighbors.

Despite this semi-official attack, the family was supported by Muslim officials and friends, who denounced those who had attacked them. Others visited the family, expressing sympathy and some even offered to pay for damages caused by the attack. ✨

“The obvious aim is to allow the government to distance itself from international condemnation for its treatment of Bahá'ís, by claiming that they can't help it if the people themselves feel prejudice against them.”

— Diane
Ala'í, Bahá'í
International
Community

In Vietnam, a milestone for Bahá'ís

Delegates from the Cham minority communities prepare for balloting at the first Bahá'í National Convention in Vietnam in 33 years.



After 33 years, and for the first time since the unification of the North and the South, a national Bahá'í governing body has been elected in Vietnam — with the blessing of the government.

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — The Bahá'ís of Vietnam have reached a historic milestone with the election — for the first time in many years — of a national Bahá'í administrative body.

In Vietnam, the Bahá'í national convention and election held 20-21 March 2008 were the first since the unification of North and South Vietnam in 1975.

“This is important because it was the first time in 33 years that the government had approved that such a gathering could take place,” said Joan Lincoln, a special emissary of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, who traveled from the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, to Ho Chi Minh City for the occasion.

Preparations for the convention, including drafting the charter for the Bahá'í governing body in Vietnam, were undertaken in consultation with the government, which sent three representatives to observe the election.

The voting took place at the Bahá'í Center in Ho Chi Minh City on the first day of the convention, followed the next day by a con-

sultative session in a large hall that had been decorated with flowers of congratulation sent by various government and police agencies. More than 20 officials from the central, provincial and district governments attended, which was highlighted by the adoption by the Bahá'ís of the new charter.

Documents now will be submitted to the government for the next stage in the official recognition of the Bahá'í Faith in Vietnam.

The Bahá'í Faith was established in Vietnam in 1954. In 1957, Bahá'ís there joined with a number of other countries in southeast Asia to form a Regional Spiritual Assembly, and in 1964 the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Vietnam was formed. The Bahá'í Faith is established in virtually every country of the world, and in most nations the Bahá'ís each year elect a National Spiritual Assembly of nine individuals to administer their affairs and guide the community.

A number of people attending the activities had joined the Bahá'í Faith in the 1950s and 1960s and had remained firm in the religion despite the years of restrictions on

certain activities.

“The high point for me,” Mrs. Lincoln said, “was seeing the Bahá’ís from all over Vietnam, the north, the central, and the south, who had been so steadfast for over three decades, remaining obedient to the government and to the Universal House of Justice and waiting patiently until they could re-establish their activities fully.

“It was thrilling to see the delegates greet one another, and that the older believers had been able to bring up their children as Bahá’ís, and to see so many young couples with their own children — the third generation of Bahá’ís — at the convention.”

Mrs. Lincoln expressed appreciation for government gestures toward the Bahá’ís. “They had taken many measures to show their support,” she said, noting that representatives from the government-run press and television attended some of the activities and reported on them. “The warm relations between the new National Spiritual Assembly and the government were impressive to me,” she said.

She also mentioned the Bahá’í youth and “how present in the organization of the convention they were — saying the prayers, singing passages from the Bahá’í writings, manning the computers, handling the logistics, the food, the microphones, raising the spirit ... doing all the things that youth do.”

As part of the convention, Mrs. Lincoln presented to the government of Vietnam a gift from the Universal House of Justice consist-

ing of a framed, color facsimile of two of the personal seals of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith.

Nguyen Thanh Xuan, vice chairman of the Government Committee on Religion, accepted the gift, and also gave the Bahá’ís a framed portrait of Ho Chi Minh. Mrs. Lincoln earlier had paid a courtesy visit to a government office in Ho Chi Minh City where gifts also were exchanged.

During the convention, a special message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of Vietnam was read.

“The Bahá’í Community of Vietnam is regaining ground on a trail that leads to a constructive future,” the message said, in part. “In restoring your National Spiritual Assembly, with the gratefully acknowledged support of your national government, you now enter upon a period of dynamic development of far-reaching virtue and influence.”

On the night of 20 March, more than 200 Bahá’ís and friends from around the country joined in a new year’s celebration — one of the largest gatherings of Vietnamese Bahá’ís in three decades.

Special guests for the convention and the new year’s celebration, included representatives of the Bahá’í communities of Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, and Thailand, and Mr. Jaya Gopan Ramasamy of Malaysia, representing the Bahá’í Continental Board of Counsellors in Asia. *

— Bahá’í World News Service

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— Joan Lincoln, special emissary



Joan Lincoln, a special emissary of the Universal House of Justice, paid a courtesy call to the vice chairman of the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City at the seat of government there.

In Haifa, a global election showcases global diversity

Delegates from around the world lined up to consult about issues facing the Bahá'í community.



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The delegates to the convention are the members of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies of the world, who were themselves elected by delegates chosen at the grassroots level in their own countries. Thus virtually every adult Bahá'í in the world had the opportunity to participate in the election of their supreme body, an event that occurs every five years.

About 500 of the 1494 delegates could not be present for voting, for personal or other reasons. Those who could not attend sent ballots by mail, and there were numerous pauses in the procession as tellers brought forward absentee ballots, removed an identifying outer envelope, and dropped the inner contents into the ballot box.

In the case of Iran, where 300,000 Bahá'ís face intense persecution and Bahá'í administration has been outlawed, the absence of delegates was noted by the placement of 95

red roses at the front of the stage and the reading of a message from Iranian Bahá'ís.

The entire process took about a week, as delegates spent several days in advance of the actual voting on visits to Bahá'í holy places here in an effort to cultivate an attitude of prayer and reflection. Then, after the voting and the announcement of results the next day, delegates remained for two days to discuss topics of concern to the Bahá'í world.

After the election, one key topic for discussion was an analysis of how a recently launched initiative, which seeks to provide service to humanity around the world through four “core activities,” was faring.

Many delegates said the initiative, built around children's classes, devotional meetings, study circles, and programs for young teens, was starting to yield results.

In India, for example, it was reported that more than 80,000 people have studied a basic booklet that discusses simple moral virtues and the nature of human spiritual reality. Some 6,000 people in India have advanced to the seventh book in the same series of material, which was created by the Bahá'í-inspired

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With no nominations or campaigning, how does the Bahá'í electoral process work?

HAIFA, Israel — In a world where democratic elections are valued in principle but strained in practice, the electoral process used by the worldwide Bahá'í community suggests a distinctive alternative.

Those who have studied the Bahá'í system say its features are unlike anything in common use — but are nevertheless manifestly democratic, transparent, and representative. Distinctive aspects of Bahá'í elections include:

- No nominations. Instead, the entire adult community is eligible for office, giving electors ultimate freedom of choice.
- No campaigning. As such, money, negative advertising, and ego are entirely absent from the process.
- No parties. Instead, the emphasis on choosing qualified people, not making promises or linking to a platform.

Taken all together, these and other features, combine to create a system that is “eminently democratic — indeed more so than any other system in existence,” said Michael Karlberg, author of *Beyond the Culture of Contest*, which among other things examines the Bahá'í governance system.

Dr. Karlberg and others state that such procedures shift the emphasis from the dynamics of power, personality, money, and constituencies to a paradigm of service and rational consultation, with an emphasis on the good of all.

“There is no professional path a person must follow or political roles he or she must take before being considered worthy of election,” said Wendi Momen, who was a member of the national governing council of the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom for 23 years. “The qualities of those elected are not political capacities but qualities of the spirit reflected in the day to day actions of that individual.

“In other words, we believe a person's life is reflected in their service to the community, and so we would be looking at candidates in terms of how well do their words match their deeds,” said Ms. Momen.

How it works

At all levels — local, national, and international — Bahá'í elections follow a common procedure.

First, the electorate is composed of all Bahá'ís over the age of 21 in the given geographic area — whether a municipality, a nation, or the world.

The electors gather (or use mail-in ballots) and, after prayer and reflection, each elector writes down the names of the nine people that he or she feels are most qualified to serve.

At the local and national levels, any adult Bahá'í within the electorate pool is eligible for election. Women make up between 35-40 percent of the total membership of national and continental institutions worldwide. For the Universal House of Justice, any adult male Bahá'í from anywhere in the world is eligible for election. Membership on that body is limited to men because of a specific stipulation in the Bahá'í

sacred writings, the wisdom of which, it is promised, will become clear in the future.

Balloting is secret, with no nominations, campaigning or pledges to specific policies, parties, or platforms.

After the votes are counted, the nine people who receive the most votes are elected. At the local and national levels, elections are conducted every year. At the international level, for the Universal House of Justice, elections are held every five years.

In general, said Brian Lepard, a professor of law at the University of Nebraska, “the fact that everyone is eligible to be elected opens up the whole process in a way that is far more democratic than the current process in any country.

“In many countries, not only do you have to decide to be a candidate and to run, but you also need lots of money to do that. And there are many talented and capable people who don't have the money or resources to run. So that severely restricts the choice that people have,” said Dr. Lepard.

Moreover, said Dr. Lepard and others, the focus is on choosing individuals for their experience and inherent capacities, rather than their positions on issues.

“There is no need to know the ‘positions’ that individuals have on specific issues because individuals are not elected for their positions,” said Dr. Karlberg, who is an associate professor of communication at Western Washington University. “Rather, they are elected for qualities such as trustworthiness, integrity, loyalty, selfless devotion, a well-trained mind, recognized ability, and mature experience.

“They are, in effect, elected based on their ability to apply principles, within a process of collective decision making, to the solution of problems, to the articulation of policies, and to the identification of courses of action,” said Dr. Karlberg.

These and other concepts in Bahá'í elections tend to lead to the election of candidates of considerable breadth of background and experience.

“Last year the election of our National Spiritual Assembly in Guinea, three new members were elected — all very capable and with a record of devoted and selfless service,” said Thelma Khelghati, a member of that body.

“One was a university student who had been very active in organizing our national youth conference and also in conducting study circles and children's classes. Another was a farmer from a community where they have daily devotional meetings at six in the morning. The third was a devoted Bahá'í with a PhD in Industrial Psychology from a university in the former Soviet Union who works for an NGO in the education sector in Guinea.

“For me, that these three capable, selfless and devoted individuals could be elected without any nomination, propaganda or electioneering was tangible proof that the system does work,” said Ms. Khelghati. ❀

Wikinomics

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Technology (MIT) Open Courseware program — a free online catalogue spanning the entire curriculum of this prestigious university.

Wikinomics cites four core principles which define this new mode of collaboration: openness, “peer production,” sharing, and acting globally. These are contrasted with the “hierarchical, closed, secretive and insular multinational [company] that dominated the previous century.”

All are evidence of a shift in values — and perhaps an emerging ethic — that is gradually dissolving the attitudinal, intellectual and structural obstacles that maintained earlier patterns of collaboration. Against the backdrop of complex global problems including security, poverty, climate change and gross violations of human rights, such a shift is eminently practical as it breaks with those norms and patterns that have proven incapable of moving us out of the social and economic quagmire in which the peoples of the world are bogged down.

The authors situate the current developments as the latest revolution in communication technology: the concept of the Internet as a static tool is giving way to a dynamic, participatory environment, one in which the individual shifts from passive user to active co-creator.

The Internet has gone through a number of significant transformations since its inception in 1969 with the expansion of electronic mail to a global scale and the creation of the World Wide Web. We are now witnessing the succeeding revolution — some have called it the “participation age” — defined principally by its ethos of collaborative content and knowledge generation. With the aid of interactive media, readers of news are no longer passive recipients of information, but participate in how that information is distributed and ultimately interpreted. (While the spread of internet penetration has been grossly uneven, growth statistics are promising; Africa’s usage, for example, has increased nine-fold over the last seven years and is steadily climbing.)

The phenomenon of mass collaboration has already yielded an unprecedented outpouring of innovation, both in substance and in process. As the authors note, by applying the principles of wikinomics, “we can transform the way we conduct science, create culture, inform and educate ourselves, and govern our communities and nations.” In

the process, we are reminded about the true sources of human motivation, namely the desire to be part of a greater whole, to collaborate, to create and to know.

For Bahá’ís, the new trends outlined in *Wikinomics* are largely consistent with the vision of humanity’s future outlined in the Bahá’í sacred writings. Bahá’ís understand that the key to a peaceful and prosperous future lies in the recognition of our global interdependence and essential oneness as a single human race. Indeed, the Bahá’í Faith calls for a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, in order to function as members of a body with higher level interests and goals.

Moreover, Bahá’ís envision that the engine powering such a construction is the empowered, global-minded individual, working in cooperation and collaboration with others. This paradigm is outlined in the Bahá’í concept of consultation, a distinctive method for group decision-making — which in many ways parallels the wikinomics model.

“So vital is [consultation] to the success of collective endeavor,” asserts a 1995 statement of the Bahá’í International Community, “that it must constitute a basic feature of a viable strategy of social and economic development. Indeed, the participation of the people on whose commitment and efforts the success of such a strategy depends becomes effective only as consultation is made the organizing principle of every project.”

From the broader perspective of history, the Bahá’í Faith views the current patterns of social transformation and innovation as a transition from collective “childhood” to collective maturity. The barriers raised by the thoughts, attitudes, and practices of the childhood of humankind are gradually being uprooted, and structures of a new civilization that reflect the capacities of a maturing humanity are taking shape.

“If certain social assumptions...have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines,” the Bahá’í Faith states.

Wikinomics offers yet another powerful example of how old ways are being swept away in the face of new paradigms — paradigms which are driven in many ways by the social and spiritual realities of humanity’s new age of interdependence and individual empowerment. *

—by Julia Berger

“We can transform the way we conduct science, create culture, inform and educate ourselves, and govern our communities and nations.”

— Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*

The “new Alexandria” and global change

We live in a period characterized by diversity, chaos and an intense search for solutions to increasingly complex and global problems.

Within that context, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* explores what may well be one of the most profound changes in our time — a shift from hierarchical lines of creation and production to a model in which almost anyone, anywhere, can contribute ideas and innovation to a given economic or social project.

Authors Dan Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams trace the evolution of this shift, explaining how a new type of “mass collaboration” that encompasses virtual networks and teams — drawn from the 1.3 billion individuals now connected via the Internet — are writing encyclopedias, creating computer operating systems, proposing solutions to poverty, reporting on events around the world, and building social networks.

Mr. Tapscott, a business strategy consultant and Professor of Management at Canada’s University of Toronto, coined the term *wikinomics* to describe an economic model for generating value based on community, mass collaboration and self-organization. Perhaps most familiar to us is the *Wikipedia* — an online encyclopedia containing some 9 million articles authored by thousands of volunteer contributors from around the world. The term “wiki,” meaning “quick” in Hawaiian, is apt: the developments have been rapid; most of the online communities have formed in the last seven years.

While the authors conceive of *wikinomics* in primarily economic and corporate terms — highlighting opportunities for firms and entrepreneurs, the significance of this trend is far greater and extends into every sphere of human activity.

These emerging modes of collaboration, based on the desire of individuals to add their voices and efforts to the myriad of collaborative enterprises and the growing consciousness of belonging to a global community, are giving rise to a transformation that is both internal and external: as individual attitudes

and values embrace the concept of a global community so, too, are they reflected in the social structures that members of society create.

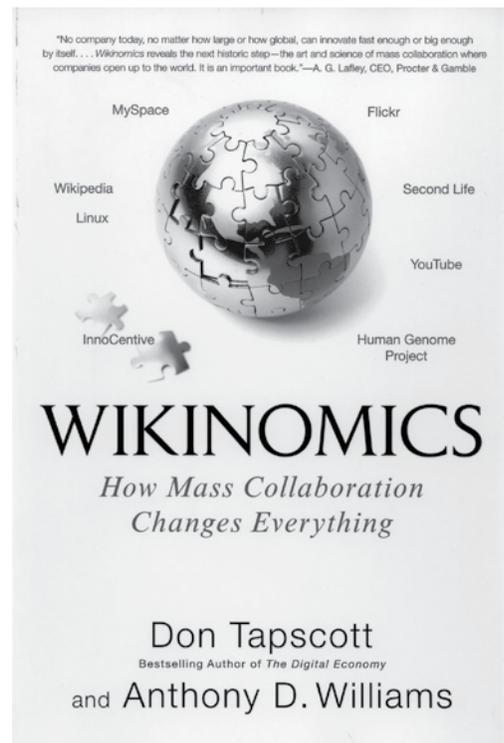
The authors see many of the new initiatives and the vision behind them as the “new Alexandria” characterized by the “fastest and broadest accumulation of human knowledge and culture,” now estimated to double the stock of human knowledge every 5 years. Among these online initiatives are: *Linux* — a collaboratively created open source computer operating system; *Facebook* — a social networking website with 60 million users; *YouTube* — a video sharing website hosting about 68 million videos; *Kiva* — a website that connects individual lenders with small

Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything

By Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams

Portfolio

New York



businesses in the developing world; *InnoCentive* — an online community connecting individuals, businesses and academic institutions with a global network of over 125,000 individuals to solve some of the world toughest challenges; and the *Massachusetts Institute of* [Review](#), continued on page 15