

Testing for Committee Positions

By Michael Irwin, Rosalind Priestley, Sahlan Diver and David Week

Testing for Chairperson

Michael Irwin

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In the mid-1970s elections for Chairpersons were replaced by testing. The procedure is now handled more competently by helpers than it used to be but, by my observation, continues to be uncomfortable for them, the candidates and the members of the meeting. This discomfort often shows itself in confusion, irreconcilable testing results, stressful behavior by the spectators and upset among some candidates. The fact that the process sometimes is smooth and easy should not allow us to ignore the far too common and continuing symptoms of unease.

I believe our procedure is distorting the role of the helpers and bringing them into disrepute. Whether or not it has ever been stated as a goal, the helpers are put in the position of having to select, through the process of testing, a single winner, the only one who should at this time be the committee head. Any vote of approval after the fact is a gesture only because the helpers have already appointed the new leader.

More importantly, in transferring responsibility for appointment to the helpers, our procedure has removed a traditional responsibility from two groups of people, the candidates and the members of the meeting. This transfer has reduced the power to act by both groups and has led to tensions in them. Whether, in terms of Subud cultural values, the outcome of the selection process should be important or not, it does, in fact, matter to the participants who their chairperson will be. Because it matters, any reduction in their capacity to influence the outcome is bound to produce tension.

For candidates, the decision to remain a candidate is, historically, their own responsibility. Removing this responsibility produces a curious side effect: passivity. Although it is not necessary, many nominated people agree to stand only after testing. In doing so these candidates ignore an important quality of committee leaders, the unequivocal wish to do the job.

Even though, through their own repeated testing, more than one candidate continues to stand, the procedure requires that only one will be chosen. Having no acceptable alternative, the helpers eventually feel obliged to test for the candidates to find the one right person. Everyone tacitly agrees. Because they now become the interpreters of God's Will, the helpers cannot help but behave like priests. The helpers' testing must not fail. Their unanimity is important to the candidates, to the meeting and, unfortunately, to the helpers themselves. Inconsistency is inherent in testing and is nothing to be ashamed of, but inconsistency implies that some helpers may be "wrong". Helpers become afraid to reveal publicly what they have received. When they consult privately and return a unanimous decision the lack of openness is noticed by the observers who then doubt the integrity of the process. The helpers, now victims, are unfairly held to a standard of perfection as an unintended consequence of removing candidate responsibility.

The second group of people shorn of responsibility are the voters. The inability to use their vote in a major decision such as choosing their chief officer, is justified by a

procedure which promises “a better way”. It is probably impossible to demonstrate whether past results have justified this promise. The uncertainty of the promise and the loss of franchise produce tension. In our procedure only the perfunctory and usually postponed vote of acclamation is permitted after personal congratulations have been given to the new incumbent.

A change in the process is needed which will reduce tension, retain the valuable Subud technique of testing and result in a more comfortable experience for all.

If the decision to remain a candidate remains with the candidates then, sometimes, more than one candidate will want to continue to stand after considerable testing. The usual result in our society is to have a vote. Voting itself is considered normal and will not produce any unusual tensions. Testing, however, can enhance the voting process because the voters will have witnessed it. In addition, the members can now receive for themselves when they vote. Differences of opinion among voters are normal and not indicative of failure. The members and the candidates on being given back their responsibility, retrieve with it their self esteem. Helpers will not have to be seen to be perfect. Instead, they will be seen as assisting in the process. Subud will have comfortably added the valuable tool of testing to its elections without anyone being diminished by the process.

I recently had a confirmation of my analysis. I was paid a social visit by one of our Regional Helpers and I explained my ideas to him. About two months later I was present when my visitor conducted the testing for a Regional Chairperson. As I watched, I became aware that he had thought about what I had said and was conducting the process in the spirit of my suggestions. At the end of every stage of testing the helper respectfully asked the candidates, one by one, if they wished to continue. The audience remained calm and harmonious and the result was satisfying to everyone.

It is true in this case that when the usual three questions were completed, all candidates except one had retired of their own accord. However, given multiple remaining candidates I am sure that the meeting would not have found an election to be out of place nor a sign of failure. Furthermore, I believe it would be useful to limit the questions to the usual three and not to invent any new questions just because a single winner has not been picked. In this way the procedure could become simple and short.

This critique does not imply that our current method has always produced poor results nor that helper assisted testing should be abandoned as a useful addition to the normal election process.

Testing for Office

by Rosalind Priestley

When as a relatively new member I first witnessed a candidate being tested for group Chair, I found it very exciting. For the first time I was seeing an election that was responsive to spiritual considerations. Imagine if in the outside world one could get a glimpse into the deepest recesses of a candidate's character before voting. It made me proud of my organization. I also found it very moving to be able to witness someone in a state of receiving. It made the latihan more real somehow to see the candidates in their sock feet moving and vocalizing in that unique way before one's very eyes in a fully lit room, even if the experience felt a bit voyeuristic.

But over the years the novelty wore off and I began to see some disadvantages. Like

other Subud practices, testing for a Chair is understood in the context of a set of beliefs, a 'mystique' one might say. One of those beliefs is that choosing a Chair is an important decision that God would want to be consulted on, and that we can make that happen through testing. This is in itself a rather questionable notion. In societies in the real world, political choice is rarely influenced by priests, and where it is, we don't generally consider this to be a healthy state of affairs.

Another aspect of the mystique has been our assumption that of the available candidates only one person is right for the job at any particular time. This involves us in convoluted attempts to determine who is that One Right Person—when actually it could be the case that several people could do the job well, or that no suitable candidate is available, or that none of the available candidates would be ideal but all would do the job adequately. (What are the odds that the ideal person is at hand for any job, at any time? In real life we are always dealing with compromises, and if we look at the history of our groups we see office-holders who run the gamut from excellent to disastrous.) In any case, it is rather a strange notion, that God has a particular person in mind and it's our job to find out who it is.

In putting this emphasis on finding the right person, we ignore considerations like policies, issues and goals. As far as the latter are concerned, we are often getting a pig in a poke, especially at the wider levels of the organization where candidates may not be known (or at least not well known) to a majority of the members. In the ordinary world candidates run with platforms and you vote with a sense of the candidate's views and priorities. But when we use testing alone, the platform is a hidden agenda; we give the chosen person a mandate to make of the job whatever he or she likes. The members are deprived of the power to choose a candidate on the basis of his or her stated goals or priorities, something we take for granted in the real world.

Choosing a Chair this way can foster certain dysfunctional attitudes. There is a tendency to believe that if the right person is in the job, then that person's decisions about how the job should be done must also be right. Having been approved by God, new Chairs may feel that all they have to do is follow their own instincts or inclinations. Consequently they may feel it unnecessary to find out exactly what the job entails, or how it's done in the "ordinary" world, or to spend time acquiring skills, or to learn from their predecessors, or to work hard at it. They may also feel it unnecessary to consult with the members they are supposed to be serving.

If the person chosen has the ability to inspire support from the other members, it may work out well. But sometimes the members, perhaps subliminally feeling disempowered by the whole process, are happy to walk away from any feeling of responsibility with the half-conscious rationalization: "God has spoken, and I'm out of it now." This is unfortunate from their own point of view, because they then have less influence on the organization that serves them, but it is also unfortunate from the point of view of the new office-holder, because he or she needs the input and the support of the group in order to function well.

Another risk with testing is that members may be moved to stand for office because they find the experience of being tested exciting or they hope for the honour of being "chosen by God" but without having given much thought to whether they have the time or the abilities or the interest to take on the actual work.

Testing for the Will of God (or the gods) was something the Ancients did by examining the entrails of sheep or observing the flight of birds. We now regard these practices as outgrown superstitions inappropriate for our modern age. There are good uses for testing in Subud, but I question whether trying to discover the Deity's intention is one of them. Even supposing that the person chosen by testing

represents God's agenda for us, without the members' support and agreement, he or she will get nowhere with it. Better to vote in a candidate whose views are known, whose abilities are established, and who has the confidence and support of the members.

Believing Our Own Inventions

By Sahlan Diver

The practise of testing in the chairperson probably originated with Bapak. Certainly Bapak did it for the "big appointments":

"Bapak now wishes to choose the Chairman of the International Subud Committee which will reside in Australia, in other words, it is not the Chairman of a local committee but of the whole of Subud. So the person chosen will have to be not only strong but intelligent, and Bapak would like you now to receive. Oh yes, Bapak will choose one of you as Chairman and another as Vice-chairman or assistant. Bapak would now like you to receive, receive with complete sincerity, not wishing to become Chairman but leaving it to Almighty God whatever He decides. Receive according to God's gift, surrender everything that will happen to Almighty God, show your willingness and Bapak will be witness to it. Bapak chooses as Chairman Ramdhan Simpson, and as Vice-Chairman Salamah O'Brien.

http://www.subudlibrary.net/library/Bapak_English/BAPAK541.HTM

Notice, however, in the above quote, the implication is that, for the local committee at least, "strong and intelligent" are sufficient qualities; testing should not be necessary.

The legacy of this practise promoted by Bapak, and adopted by us for all appointments great and small is that we don't have a truly representative democracy in Subud, in the sense of people being elected on the basis of their political platform. We have tested-in officials. Some of these may widely consult to ascertain their members' views before attending meetings. Usually this does not happen. The person turns up for the national or zonal meeting without any mandate. Subud has needed a way of justifying this blatantly unbalanced and unrepresentative system of governance, and what has accordingly slipped into our popular culture is the invention of various myths surrounding the special status of the chair. Actual phrases one hears, often spoken in an atmosphere of great reverence and seriousness, are: "The chairperson is able to receive the direction that all of us should be following at the present time," or "The chairperson of a country is responsible for carrying the 'feeling' of that country with them to the zonal meeting." In one case, an ex-chair was actually heard to say that he had felt during his term of office "as if Almighty God had been the chairman".

If Subud is to become more democratic and representative we need to drop the practise of testing our committee chairs. This may be difficult as long as we continue to believe in the special *kejiwaan*-boosted status of the chairperson. We must be willing to reverse out of our former mistake and replace invention with reality.

Voting as a Human Right

By David Week

The third of the Ten Aims of the Subud Association is to 'protect the good reputation of Subud'. Implicit in this aim is the need to observe local laws and norms in the way that we behave and operate.

A few members I've met have the attitude that Subud is above mere 'heart and mind' legislation. This I find a dangerous attitude. One needs only to read the front pages of the newspaper to see stories of people who consider themselves above the law, and believe themselves to be carrying out divine instructions.

Once ordinary human laws and norms are disregarded, there is the potential for all hell to break loose. Therefore whatever we do on our individual journeys, we should be extremely suspicious of any 'guidance' which puts us outside the framework of what our fellow humans see as just, fair or honourable behaviour.

As well as national laws, we have a growing framework of international laws, which seek to govern the way that States treat each other, and the way in which they treat their own citizens. One of the more important documents is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Article 18 of the Covenant guarantees religious freedom. Those Subud members who advocate some kind of Subud theocracy should consider that in real theocracies—such as Iran—Subud does not and cannot exist. It's only in the Enlightenment spirit of such international covenants on human rights that freedom of religious practice and belief exist.

Article 25 speaks directly to democracy. It asserts that people have a right to take part in public affairs either directly or through 'freely elected' representatives. Free election, to me, implies choice. Article 25 also specifically mentions the requirement for 'secret ballots'. There are very good reasons for having choices, and for privacy in making choices.

The process in which helps test candidates and then present one of those candidates to the membership as the approved candidate is almost identical to the process that used to occur in Communist states. In those elections, an inner circle of party members (themselves appointed by the party, for life) select suitable candidates for positions and then call elections in which the people are asked to vote 'yes' or 'no'. These are not generally considered free and fair elections.

It also takes an unusually brave and forward individual to stand up in a room of people and—after a long and complex process arriving at a result—say 'I don't agree.' Where there is no secret ballot, there is enormous psychological and social pressure to conform: to 'not rock the boat'.

We are responsible for the processes we use for appointing our representatives. In doing so, we need also to take responsibility for ensuring that our processes stand up to scrutiny against the norms and standards of the communities in which we live. For most of the world today, that means the principles embodied in international covenants and declarations such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

What that boils down to is that no matter how we arrange the election process, we need to give people (a) choices, and (b) the right to express their choice in private. To do otherwise is to fall below internationally accepted standards, and thus bring Subud into disrepute.