

Middle East Opinion: What "Lincoln" Shows Us About Personal Politics in the Gulf States

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Tonight, we will find out if "Lincoln" wins Best Picture in the Academy Awards Ceremony in California. Set in early 1865 during the closing months of the US Civil War, the movie features Daniel Day Lewis as President Abraham Lincoln, trying to win Congressional approval for the 13th Amendment to the Constitution --- a measure that would outlaw slavery in America.

With Barack Obama as the first African American President and hailing from Lincoln's home state of Illinois, many commentators have made comparisons between the two men and their political eras in America.

But Lincoln offers insights for politics beyond American shores and the 1860s --- for example, in today's six Gulf State monarchies.

From Saudi Arabia to Oman to the United Arab Emirates, business leaders, leading cultural figures and members of royal families hold diwans (majlis), where they grant personal audiences to ordinary individuals, listen to their problems, and offer assistance. These meetings occur several times a week, go on for hours, and involve both men and women.

The encounters are a key part of local government in the Gulf: they force powerful elites to be personally accessible to ordinary citizens, permitting them to voice concerns, hold leaders accountable, and maintain a just social order. By contrast, the leaders of Egypt and the other republics in the Arab Middle East rarely have one-on-one meetings with ordinary citizens or have opportunities to hear their concerns directly.

In an early scene in Lincoln, the President and one of his most trusted advisors, Secretary of State William Seward, meet Mr. and Mrs. Jolly, an ordinary couple from Missouri. The Jollys ask Lincoln to reverse a decision made two years earlier by a top US general to strip them of a toll booth that they ran near Jefferson City. Lincoln and Seward not only listen to the couple's concerns --- they also seek their views on the end of the Civil War, freedom for enslaved blacks, and the thirteenth amendment.

As the meeting concludes, Lincoln promises to investigate the Jollys' claim to the toll booth by the next day. He also asks the couple to visit their Congressman, who has not taken a position on

the 13th amendment, and voice their strong support for it. The couple leaves the room clearly aware of the political quid pro quo sought by the President.

The President's meeting with the Jollys is not just a construction by director Stephen Spielberg. Lincoln spent close to four hours a day meeting with petitioners from all walks of life while in the White House. Through these personal exchanges, Lincoln and his top advisors measured public opinion and harnessed it for their political objectives. The meetings helped cement Lincoln's legitimacy with the American public during wartime and aided his landslide victory in the 1864 Presidential elections.

Almost 150 years later, US Presidents have largely abandoned meeting with ordinary citizens in the White House. Such meetings can be dangerous, and there are a host of other tools that Presidents can employ to find out public opinion and to communicate with voters, Congress, and the wider world.

By contrast, Gulf leaders still use the same personal form of politics that served Lincoln well. Such strategies may explain why they have weathered the political changes over the past 2 1/2 years, in contrast to counterparts from Egypt to Libya to Syria.

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