Former US President Bill Clinton gave one of the best speeches of his life at the recent Democratic National Convention. One of the biggest rounds of applause came when he said that President Barack Obama’s appointment of Hillary Clinton as his Secretary of State after she had been his principal political rival proved that “democracy does not have to be a blood sport.”

That applause reflected the view of the majority of American voters that US politics has become much too partisan, and that rivals are more interested in attacking each other – “drawing blood” – than they are in focusing on political issues. But what President Clinton was really saying was that Secretary Clinton’s ability to go to other countries and work with her former political rival in pursuit of the national interest is a powerful example of the way democracy is supposed to work.

That is an important point to make, because in far too many countries democracy remains – literally – a blood sport. The value of the ballot is to seize power and then harass, detain, or even kill your opponents. As the slogan goes: “One man, one vote, one time.” Indeed, the National Endowment for Democracy in the US describes some countries as “electoral dictatorships.”

Many fear precisely such an outcome for the Arab awakening, with popular movements toppling despots, only to install new dictators via elections. The only way to avoid it is to be more committed to the process of electing a government freely and fairly than to the leader or party that is elected, even when the victor is frankly inimical to your interests.

That is also the conundrum of US policy in the Middle East in the midst of ongoing revolution.

For 30 years, the US government supported secular rulers who justified their iron grip on power by insisting that the choice was between them and “the Islamists” – whom they portrayed as religious zealots bent on taking their countries back to the Middle Ages. Now the US must convince skeptical populations that it is prepared to do business with elected Islamist governments.

People who have come to believe in US omnipotence and determination to pursue its interests in their region cannot easily believe that its government is suddenly prepared to endorse an outcome that it did not want. Indeed, some Coptic Christian and liberal parties protested against Hillary Clinton during her visit to Egypt this past June, because, in their view, the US must have wanted the Muslim Brotherhood to come to power.

Future US policy must embody a simple but powerful principle: America will engage with and support (through various kinds of foreign assistance) any government chosen through internationally monitored free and fair elections that then governs according to a popularly ratified national constitution, with compliance overseen by an independent judiciary.
Americans do not believe that liberal democracy is the best form of government because what “the people” want is automatically right or good, but because it pits interest against interest. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers*, “It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part.”

A genuinely representative assembly in the twenty-first century will not establish a polity that tolerates political prisoners, censorship, oppression of minorities and women, torture, disappearances, or detention without trial. Governments that live by their constitutional principles, even when they are imperfectly interpreted and applied, should avoid slipping back into dictatorship and are likely to be self-correcting over time.

As long as governments operate within these broad parameters, the US should look to itself before passing judgment on others. Vice President Joseph Biden also gave a powerful speech at the Democratic convention, in which he quoted a line from Obama’s inaugural address: the US should lead in the world not by “the example of our power, but by the power of our example.” Unfortunately, in terms of democratic practice, that example is badly tarnished at the moment.

The US Supreme Court has interpreted the US Constitution in a way that vitiates all restrictions on campaign spending, essentially allowing wealthy American individuals and corporations to buy elections. The support of a multi-millionaire now counts vastly more than that of an ordinary citizen, making a mockery of the principle of “one man, one vote.”

Moreover, both major US parties routinely use their power when they win to redraw electoral districts’ lines to favor themselves and hurt their opponents. And, in some states, the Republican Party is openly trying to impede voting by requiring citizens to show official photo identification, which can be difficult and expensive to obtain. These requirements are a new version of the poll tax, which Democrats in the American South used for years to disenfranchise African-American voters.

Democracy can work properly only if all citizens’ operative principle is: “I may hate what you stand for, but as long as you are elected fairly and govern constitutionally, I will defend to the death your right to compete and win.” If democracy is to be any sport at all, all players must abide by the rules of the game.