Both the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt’s liberal opposition are roundly criticizing the United States. That is hard on Ambassador Anne Patterson, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, who just visited Cairo. But it is also evidence that the US is trying to pursue the right policy.

The US is doing its best to support not a particular party, but rather a conception of liberal democracy that entails free and fair elections and a mode of governance that respects and includes minority views and upholds individual rights. To pursue this course, however, will require standing up to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The young people who led Egypt’s revolution two and a half years ago have been suspicious of the US for the simple reason that it supported former President Hosni Mubarak’s regime for 30 years. From the US perspective, President Barack Obama pivoted quickly from Mubarak to the people; but it did not look that way on Cairo’s streets. When the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi was elected President in 2012, many Egyptians assumed that America must have supported him, because they could not imagine that the US would accept a result that it did not want.

When Patterson tried to work with Morsi’s government in ways that allowed her to pursue US interests, including pushing for more inclusive and rights-respecting policies, the liberal opposition saw her as supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. But when the US refused to call the Egyptian military’s removal of Morsi a coup (a designation that would have required it to cut off the $1.5 billion in aid provided annually to the Egyptian army), Muslim Brotherhood supporters concluded that America supported the army’s decision.

So what should the US and other governments that support liberal democracy do now? The answer could affect Egypt’s political future and that of countries throughout the region.

As many commentators have pointed out, from the Islamists’ standpoint, Morsi’s removal looks remarkably like the Algerian military’s overthrow in 1992 (with US support) of an elected Islamist government; the Turkish military’s “soft coup” in 1997, when it forced an elected Islamist government out of power; and the US government’s reversal of its support for “Arab democracy” after Hamas won elections in Gaza in 2006. If the choice for Islamists is still bullets or ballots, bullets may now look more promising. More generally, military interference with civilian politics, for any reason, weakens the processes, institutions, and checks on state power that make liberal democracy work.

Yet an estimated 17 million Egyptians marched to protest Morsi’s government, the majority of them citizens who had been mobilized through a petition process to demand a government responsive to their needs. Morsi and his Freedom and Justice Party (the Muslin Brotherhood’s
political wing) gave no sign that they were prepared to accept real compromise, as opposed to tactical delays, in achieving their vision of an Islamic state. In his final speech, Morsi rallied his troops for the barricades and bloodshed rather than for the compromise that would have kept him in office.

Genuine liberal democracy requires accepting that in a pluralist, divided country, it is possible to govern only through inclusion, not imposition. Anything else suggests that political Islam is the Marxism of our time, preparing a long-term strategy ultimately aimed at replacing the system rather than reforming it. The liberal-democratic alternative is to participate in the push and pull over the role of religion in public life within limits set by a super-majoritarian constitution, as more religiously oriented parties do in the US, Europe, and Israel.

Given these competing considerations, the US should start by calling the events that began on June 30 a coup, but not yet a military coup, on the grounds that a true military coup replaces the existing government with a military government. That has not happened, and it may not happen if genuinely free and fair elections, with the participation of all parties, take place within six months.

The US should therefore declare that it will cut off its aid to Egypt’s military at a specified date unless elections take place. But that decision involves US-Israeli relations as much as US-Egyptian relations, because US aid has been aimed at securing and preserving Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel. In the last two weeks, Israel has increased cooperation with Egypt’s generals to pursue Islamist extremists in Sinai.

Equally important, the US and as many other countries as possible should make clear to Egypt’s military that the detention of Muslim Brotherhood leaders must stop unless the military tries them for publicly inciting violence. While it is legitimate to demand that the Brotherhood become a regular legal organization, rather than a shadowy network fronted by the Freedom and Justice Party, criminalization of political activity has no place in a constitutional democracy. It is the classic first step toward dictatorship, as is censorship of Muslim Brotherhood media. Egyptian elections will not be free and fair if they follow a political purge, as in Iran or Russia.

But stopping the military’s campaign against Brotherhood leaders requires engaging Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These two countries authorized a combined $8 billion in aid to Egypt immediately after June 30, and they make no secret of their desire to eradicate the Brotherhood. But political stability that is bought in this way cannot last for more than a few months.

Over the longer term, an elected government will have to bring enough parts of Egyptian society together to be able to make tough choices about dismantling the military’s corrupt state within a state, cutting subsidies, and rebuilding the economy’s foundations. Pushing the Muslim Brotherhood back underground is a recipe for further instability.

Revolutions often seesaw between extremes before the forces strong enough to overthrow governments become strong enough and legitimate enough to govern. All friends of the Egyptian
people must support the principles and processes of liberal democracy, regardless of the politicians and parties that we offend.