On Wednesday 6th January, 2021, the world watched chaos emerge from the Capitol building in Washington, DC, the legislative seat of the United States. Pro-Trump riotersstormed the building, breaking windows, drawing guns, vandalising memorabilia and invading the desks of legislators.

The aim of the mob was to disrupt the congressional process of formally certifying president-elect Joe Biden's electoral victory over Donald Trump. The session was suspended abruptly as senators and representatives were made to take cover under their desks, before ultimately being evacuated from the legislative floors.

One rioter left a note in House speaker Nancy Pelosi's office with the words "We will not back down." Another sat in the senate chambers head chair, while one made away with a podium.

The events are extraordinary. A US president refused to concede a free and fair election, opting to incite his reactionary base with conspiracies, untruths and incendiary rhetoric. The consequences of the violence will be felt not just in the US, but across the world.

This is especially true for relatively young African democracies. Trump's example will be an excuse for African leaders to minimise their own attacks on democracy in their home countries. Moving forward, when altercations break out in parliament — as they did in Kenya in 2014, when MPs engaged in fist fights over draconian anti-terrorism laws; or in Nigeria in 2018, when thugs barged into the senate while it was in session and stole the ceremonial mace — the response will inevitably be that it happens in America too.

The next time an African leader uses his power of incumbency to influence election results or to undermine credible electoral outcomes, the response will be that America does it too. And the next time an African president refuses to accept an electoral defeat, he can and will say he learnt from the 45th "leader of the free world".

But this would be disingenuous. Trump's attacks on democracy are not the whole story. Far more significant is the unrelenting opposition to these attacks, which ultimately blocked his illegality.

After losing at the polls, Trump tried to use the power of the executive, judiciary and now legislature to reverse the results. His lack of success speaks volumes about the substance of US democratic institutions. This is what Africans should point to and draw inspiration from in the face of tyrannical leaders. Amid calamity, America has got many things right — and that should be the argument used against any African leader or enabler who uses Trump's example to excuse their own behaviour.

In fact, there are a number of lessons that African leaders could — and should — learn from America's recent experiences.

- **The police are not a weapon.** Live bullets were not fired at rioters as a dispersion tactic, as has become the norm in many African countries. Rather, the police called in reinforcements, de-escalated the situation, and consistently affirmed the rights of citizens to protest. The opposition candidates are alive and well.

- **The vice-president is not a “yes man.”** Mike Pence publicly committed to officiating a ceremony in which his own electoral loss would be certified, according to normal constitutional guidelines. He will do so despite immense pressure from the president, misinformed citizens and conspiracy theorists to deny the truth.
Most legislators accepted the result. The majority of legislators from the governing Republican Party did not object to the results of a free and fair election, despite their party losing the election. Most Republican members of congress admitted that Americans made their decision, and accepted it. All Democrats were vocal against attempts by Trump and his allies to invalidate the elections and the will of the American people.

The courts remained independent. Leading up to the election, the state of Texas and the Trump legal team had attempted to invalidate the votes of tens of millions of Americans in four states where Trump lost — Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Wisconsin — by suing the states in the Supreme Court. The court struck this case down, citing a lack of legal standing for Texas to sue other states over their local election laws.

The judgment reiterated the importance of American federalism, and independence of states. This is remarkable, especially given that three of the nine judges on the nation’s highest court were appointed by Trump himself. As they are constitutionally authorised to retain Supreme Court positions for life, they leveraged their independence to uphold democratic ideals. Other judges have struck down more than 60 spurious court cases brought forward by the president’s legal team. Many of these cases were outright dismissed for their lack of evidence to support claims, and propounding evidence of a free and fair election. The judges dismissed them accordingly, despite several being Republican Trump appointees.

The media was allowed to do its job. Unlike in Nigeria, where the government imposed fines on media houses for reporting the state’s violent crackdown on #ENDSARS protesters in October 2020, the US government generally respected journalists’ right to cover the riots objectively. The US also preserved citizens’ access to social media, as some legislators even leveraged platforms to confirm their safety. This is in contrast with African nations such as Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia where at various times, the government has brazenly shut down or restricted the internet access in the county to further their political aims.

America’s democracy is very far from perfect, of course. The history of racism in the United States has complicated the issue, as the nation recalls the brutal suppression of activists protesting systemic racism from the middle of last year. Yesterday, America showed us its full capacity to respect the civil liberty of protests, and simultaneously to rally against a president that disrespected the fundamental democratic liberty of a peaceful transition of power.

It would be willful blindness if African leaders only see authoritarianism today, and not the full display of the resilience and dedication to democracy on show.