The dictionary defines civility as “formal politeness and courtesy in behavior and speech.” However, after living in D.C. these past months, I realized that civility is more than mere politeness; being polite to one another does not go very far if the ability to compromise and collaborate with one another is still absent. To find solutions to the main public problems we face, people must feel as though they can raise hard questions and defend their vital interests. Civil debate must focus on solutions to these issues instead of on personal attacks against people with differing voices. Only through more civil behavior, that is both open-minded and courteous yet still passionate, will we begin to achieve true democratic engagement.

Through my internship in D.C., I was lucky enough to witness an almost idealistic demonstration of civility and democratic engagement unfold in a place that historically could be used as an antonym to those two terms. My internship was at a non-profit organization, Women for Women International (WfWI), an organization that provides women survivors of war with the resources to move out of crisis and poverty and into self-sufficiency. It conducts operations in eight war torn-countries including, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Sudan.

Sudan has been a country at war with itself for 40 years. The referendum in Sudan on January 9, 2011, was a chance for the people to engage democratically in their country’s future by voting whether or not they wanted to split their nation into two separate countries. The emails sent to the entire WfWI expressed the hope that the southern Sudanese people’s voices would be heard but also expressed fear that this vote could lead to another period of political and civil unrest and violence. From my first day at WfWI, I could feel the gravity of the situation and sense the tension in those emails.

The final results of the referendum showed that an overwhelming majority of southern Sudanese voted to split from the north: 98.83% voted for separation. This result will lead to the creation of the world’s newest nation on July 9th, 2011. The vote was an inspirational example of civility and democratic engagement. The southern Sudanese voices were heard without the destruction, loss and violence of civil war. The peaceful election was a symbol of the possibility for true peace and civility for the people of Sudan after decades of violence and fear, and the most moving moments for me were reading the genuine relief and gratitude our Sudanese country director conveyed in her email reporting the results of the vote, the absence of any violence, and the joy of an entire population of people.

It is yet to be seen what violence may or may not unfold in the coming months leading up to July 9th, but with the back drop of our country’s feuding partisan politics over the budget and other major issues, its lack of civility and the resulting lack of democratic engagement, it was inspirational to watch such a troubled country as Sudan be able to come together with civility and engage democratically to choose a better future for themselves and their country.