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“Something is Rotten in the State of [Power-Sharing]”: Why we Celebrate the Failures of Peacebuilding in Burundi and South Sudan

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In international peacebuilding efforts, there is often a stark inconsistency between the rhetoric espoused by liberal peacebuilders and the progress made towards peace on the ground. Although power-sharing, as an emblematic tool of peacebuilding, is continually dusted off and retrofitted to (post)-conflict situations in divided societies, its track-record of success is at best dubious. This paper seeks to address the causes of this “celebration of failure” by analysing the role of discourse as a possible contributor to the preservation of power-sharing as a peacebuilding tool, one that is unable to prove its own value in most cases. Using a critical discourse analysis methodology and a theoretical framework based on Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, this paper analyses power-sharing discourses in the contexts of Burundi and South

Sudan, as demonstrated in 17 interviews held by the author with experts in the field. By following a chain of logic made evident by cognitive dissonance theory, the analysis demonstrates that the durability of power-sharing can be attributed to the maintenance of a global political order premised on neoliberalism, secular humanism, and the avoidance of Genocide. The application of cognitive dissonance theory to the performance of global governance institutions as the caretakers of power-sharing helps to illuminate the guiding power of the “Medusa Effect”, whereby an existential inability to see the world for what it really is sustains power-sharing as a tool of peacebuilding. Power-sharing’s boundless promises to alleviate human suffering and command of limitless resources should therefore be further scrutinised by peacebuilders.