Mr President, Here is Why Brown Envelopes are Dirty*

J. Oloka-Onyango
Makerere University
Kampala, Uganda

I am reliably informed that on news broadcasts aired on the night of April 28, President Museveni verbally assaulted the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda for adopting a resolution calling for an end to the giving out of brown cash-filled envelopes and other gifts by the President to religious leaders at public functions. I am also told that the President attacked me personally, asserting that I was a liar and should (or could), "Go to Hell!" I am not exactly sure why.

I did not see the newscast, but I received dozens of calls and sms messages expressing concern for my safety. Perhaps it is because I gave the keynote address at the conference and told the participants that the culture of 'envelope-giving' must end. Or maybe it is because I also called for the reinstatement of presidential term limits. Whatever it is that raised the President's anger towards me, if the IRCU did indeed adopt a resolution supporting the eradication of the culture of envelope-giving, then I can only add my voice in endorsement of such a measure. I also hope they adopted a resolution on term limits because I believe that the two are intricately connected.

Corruption has many different faces, but a single goal. It can take the form of a commission given to somebody to influence the award of a contract. Or it can be a small chai to the policeman who you want to 'persuade' to ignore the fact that your driving license has expired.

It can also be in the inducements given to an opposition leader to cross to the ruling party, or to religious leaders to turn a blind eye to the mismanagement of public funds. Whatever form it takes, the goal of any of these kinds of transactions is to gain favour or to confer advantage by the giver from the 'givee'.

The benefit to the 'givee' or recipient is much less than the gains for the person giving the bribe, the 'giver.' Secondly, it is not unusual for such inducements to be described as something different from the bribes they really are. *Kasiimo* in our Bantu languages, while in Luo it is called *mich*, which is exactly how the President describes the envelopes he gives out.

By whichever name called, such gestures are simply euphemisms for what can only be described as a means to a sinister goal. Either it is given to secure favour, to stifle dissent or to silence and seal one's lips. My short point at the IRCU conference was that those envelopes represent what I called 'institutionalised corruption,' a fact borne out by the President's insistence that there is nothing wrong with the practice. What about the law?

Under Article 98 of the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, the President is the "Fountain of Honour." Thirty years ago, a young Minister of Defence condemned then-President Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa, QC for allegedly turning State House into a "market" for all kinds of shady dealers seeking favours from the President. The name of that minister was Yoweri K. Museveni.

Whether or not the Binaisa State House had in fact been turned into a marketplace, I do not know since I was not there. But the point being made by a younger President Museveni relates directly to the brown envelopes issues. In the first instance, the money the President gives - whether it is to an association of boda boda riders, or to a religious leader - is public money.

It is not personal. Secondly, when, where, why and how this money is given is very significant. Usually, it is at a public function, after a mass or service, or at a mauledi, or following the handing over of cycles or other physical gifts. It is also important to note that the number of envelope-giving events multiplied in the run-up to the election. Was this just a coincidence?

All the above leave the impression that the gift has strings attached to it: Why? Because were it to be simply a gift, there would be no need to make it public. Indeed, it has now become commonplace for religious leaders and others who host the President to make the demand for a 'gift' the main part of their welcoming speech. And the President always obliges.

But the most disturbing thing about these 'gifts' is the criteria used to determine who gets them and why. Since this is public money, there should be a more public manner in which the process for determining who gets them, when they get them and what the gift consists of. This is because public money is a matter of public concern. In sum, it cannot be regarded as a personal presidential gift.

Hence, the IRCU is fully entitled to question its motive and to call for an end to them. As was the case with the Binaisa State House, the issue is as much about perception as it is about fact: the actions of the Fountain of Honour must be seen to be above all suspicion of impropriety.

* This article was first published in *Daily Monitor*, a Kampala newspaper, 4 May 2011.