

A FORGED PRESIDENCY

BY SONALA OLUMHENSE

The day I met Gregory Sallust, everything changed. It was in my first year in secondary school, and somewhere, I stumbled on a work of fiction called 'Faked Passports', by Dennis Wheatley. His Sallust was a British spy who was on the run, his plane having been shot down in Nazi Germany.

People – particularly spies on the run – I would learn, need creative ways to survive. Sallust had an additional reason, as is often the case in espionage matters: a beautiful woman who, in his case, was in the hands of the Nazis. I followed sleeplessly as Sallust ran through disguises and danger as he worked to save himself and the woman he hoped to rescue. In time, and through such professional relatives of Sallust as James Bond, I would understand the scope of things that spies do for themselves and their countries. And then I would learn that it is not only spies but ordinary people who, more out of greed than desperation, take dastardly risks.

Nigeria is full of Nigerians who have created disguises of character and achievement to become wealthy or appear to be intelligent or accomplished. That is why there are so many title holders, many of them fake or embellished. That is why, in some places, there are hundreds of rich people per square mile, most of them unable to put into words how they came about their money. While it may be a mystery to the rest of the world, however, Nigerians know that most of such wealth comes from the pillaging of government coffers. While a man may lie to his small children that he is the hardest-working man in the country, however, as they grow up they soon learn that there is no correlation between the massive wealth to which he lays claim, and what he earns as a government official. Most governors since 1999 are in this category.

A woman may lie to her husband and her parents about how well she is doing as an official, but deep down they know that she is not buying her expensive cars or flying charter jets or buying real estate abroad from her salary. But the problem is often not the alleged thief, it is the immediate cultural chamber around them, and in Nigeria's six decades of independence, many families and communities have become complicit in the looting of governments and offices. Everyone complains that things do not work, but few are willing to challenge the crooks in their own families let alone return lavish gifts they have received.

It is how the worst student in yesterday's class becomes today's townsman with dubious property all over the place. It is how a local government chairman becomes the area's richest, with the traditional ruler who saw him steal everything celebrating him with titles. It is how a man becomes a governor and in front of everyone, converts himself into the richest man in the state. We have seen government officials of all shades present certificates and only to be exposed. We have seen senatorial; governorship and presidential candidates stammer and stumble as soon as a



flashlight is held to their academic claims. *But never had we seen a president exposed as a certificate-forgery.* The international mass media was taking notice last week. AP News detailed the developments.

Two things make President Bola Tinubu's case particularly grim. The first is that it is not the first, or the second time the former governor of Lagos State has been accused of being less than, or different from, whom he claims to be. It is public knowledge, first in Nigeria but now internationally, that none-but-he-really knows who he is, and that if you accept one claim, it is immediately controverted by another.

The truth is that were the investigation on the authenticity of the Chicago State University certificate completely domestic, Mr Tinubu would never have been found out, just as who he was at birth, and until CSU, remain unresolved.

A man who listed Government College Ibadan (but not his elementary school) – and when found out, replaced it with Government College, Lagos, which did not exist – only for one of his praise singers to declare that he did not attend any such institutions at all as he was so bright he was home-schooled, ought to set off alarms everywhere they exist. Not in Nigeria.

Keep in mind that the questions about Tinubu's character first surfaced nearly 25 years ago when he ran for governor. At no point since then have potent questions about him ceased. Nuhu Ribadu – as the chairman of President Olusegun Obasanjo's Anti-Corruption Task Force in 2006, but who is now Tinubu's National Security Adviser – listed him at that time among the nation's 15 most corrupt governors, saying Tinubu's was "corruption of an international dimension." This is really the hub of the problem: that while we have the same legal structures as the most-developed democracies, none of them is seriously meant to produce the same service as their counterparts. In a four-part story in 2011, I called it: 'Non-Governing Governance', where a nation merely pretends that a government in place means governance. Think about it: our police force, rather than maintaining law and order, specialises in the provision of domestic services for the privileged. The duties of our security agencies consist largely of securing convoys and waving clients and the most ruthless through any bottlenecks.

But now it is about to get considerably worse. Unless the Supreme Court does what appears to be contrary to the character of the Nigerian judiciary, waving the red card in Tinubu's face and shooing him in the other direction, Tinubu will continue with what he has done on both sides of the Atlantic: pull his cap down and hide in the open.

Officialdom will be rejuvenated in his favour, using resources we barely have, to massage his ego and polish his image even as the Nigerian nation and its citizens around the world