

Tinubu's FBI files and the Hypocrisy of “Demarketing Nigeria”

There is something almost surreal about the Nigerian government's campaign against “demarketing” Nigeria. It is one thing for citizens to be urged not to wish their country ill. It is quite another for those presiding over the country's most embarrassing failures to blame citizens for the smell coming from the room. The argument sounds patriotic: Nigerians should not “demarket” their country or portray Nigeria as a failed state. Citizens, officials say, should be ambassadors rather than antagonists. But patriotism is not the same thing as public relations. That distinction matters more than ever as fresh legal developments in the United States have again pushed Bola Tinubu's old Chicago records into international conversation. On August 20, 2026, the FBI asked a US federal court for permission to explain privately why it has withheld some records sought under FOIA relating to investigations from 1992 and 1993. The agency says public disclosure could expose investigative techniques and potentially endanger lives. The reputational damage created by questions surrounding a country's president is not the same thing as the reputational damage caused by citizens asking those questions. If Nigeria's image is bleeding, Nigerians have every right to ask who opened the artery.

When the head of state of Africa's most populous country repeatedly becomes the subject of international controversies over his past, his credentials, his political history and now renewed litigation over U.S. investigative records, the embarrassment belongs first to the political establishment. So, when Femi Gbajabiamila, Tinubu's Chief of Staff, tells Nigerians in the diaspora not to “demarket” Nigeria, and that citizens must not use international platforms to damage the country's economic interests or portray Nigeria as hopeless, the question is not whether his underlying principle is wrong. The problem is the messenger. In 2007, Georgia's Supreme Court suspended Gbajabiamila's law licence for 36 months after he admitted violating professional financial and ethical rules concerning a \$25,000 client settlement. His subsequent rise to Speaker of the House and then Chief of Staff demonstrates that Nigerian politics can absorb controversies that would ordinarily demand sustained questions about fitness for public office. If the world is supposed to judge Nigeria by the conduct and credibility of its institutions, what message does it receive when men with complicated international records occupy the commanding heights of government and then lecture ordinary Nigerians about protecting the national image? It is like a hotel manager standing outside a burning building, scolding residents for telling passers-by that there is smoke inside. The same applies to Tinubu. Three decades on from the 1993 case in which US authorities pursued a Chicago heroin-ringing investigation involving his name, having a serving Nigerian head of state's American law-enforcement history litigated in open court tells us something about the reputational vacuum surrounding the presidency. Tinubu was also one of

five finalists in OCCRP's 2024 Person of the Year in Organized Crime and Corruption project. When an international investigative organization places a sitting president at the centre of a global conversation about corruption and organized crime, this is not the profile of a president positioned to lecture anyone about protecting the national image.

Donald Trump's description of Nigeria as a “disgraced country” and Washington's redesignation of Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” over religious-freedom concerns were humiliating moments for a country that sees itself as a regional power. No Nigerian citizen manufactured the insecurity that gave the accusation its opening. Then there are the repeated institutional scandals: allegations of fake government agencies penetrating the bureaucracy, questions about procurement and budgetary controls, controversies surrounding the National Assembly, insecurity, disputed elections, and accusations of selective anti-corruption enforcement. Each episode may have its own explanation, but all of these create a reputational



pattern. Reputation is not repaired by censorship, intimidation or patriotic sermons. It is repaired by producing fewer scandals. A nation is not demarketed when its citizens expose corruption. A nation is not demarketed by citizens who describe a pothole. It is demarketed when the government leaves the pothole open for years, paints it in the national colours, erects a billboard beside it proclaiming “Renewed Hope,” and then arrests the pedestrian who photographs it. What actually demarkets a country is an acclaimed fake agency drawing a real budget line, politicians facing serious Economic and Financial Crimes Commission cases having those cases quietly stall after crossing the carpet to the ruling party, an unresolved death at the residence of a minister who was once accused of sexual harassment, with no justice in sight, and a president whose name keeps surfacing on lists no leader should want to be nominated for. Nigeria's greatest public-relations problem is therefore not Nigerians speaking. It is Nigeria giving them too much to talk about. When your own government becomes the crime scene, asking citizens to stop reporting it is not patriotism. The question for those in power is this: if telling the truth about Nigeria abroad is “demarketing” the country, what exactly are they asking Nigerians to market?