

# Cardinal calls pre-election arms smuggling ‘danger signal’

LAGOS, Nigeria – Lagos Cardinal Anthony Olubunmi Okogie called the smuggling of arms into Nigeria a few weeks before the general elections a “danger signal.”

“These arms are not in the military barracks; neither are they in the hands of law enforcement agents who are authorized to carry arms,” he said.

Speaking with media executives during a March 29 seminar organized by Caritas Nigeria, the archbishop said the weapons were in the hands of politicians and their agents who were prepared to use them in urban warfare if the elections did not go their way.

The Independent Electoral Commission has scheduled the elections for April 14 and 21. It would be the first time one democratically elected government would be transitioning to another without any military interregnum.

The cardinal condemned Nigerian politicians who had always seen violence as an option for gaining access to power and described their actions as “ominous clouds of violence likely to threaten the April elections.”

Cardinal Okogie urged politicians not to regard the elections as a do-or-die affair, adding that “elections are recurrent affairs. If you don’t win today, there is still tomorrow.”

He advised the electoral commission to ensure free and fair elections, stressing that anyone using violence to secure victory should be promptly disqualified and prosecuted.

The commission “should announce the results based on votes cast, not the result that had been predetermined even before voting began,” he said.

Cardinal Okogie urged security agents not to allow themselves to be used by anyone to achieve selfish and ulterior motives.

“Your duty is to provide security for all Nigerians, candidates of all the political parties and (electoral commission) officials,” he said.

He also asked the judiciary to be clearly independent and discharge its responsibilities without fear or favor.

“The judiciary should see to it that cases referred to it in connection with elections are promptly disposed of before the purported winners assume office,” he said. “A situation where the judgment on a case is given months, even years into the tenure of a political officer is manifestly unjust.”

When Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of the All Nigeria Peoples Party, contested his loss in the 2003 presidential election, the case lasted 30 months before it was thrown out by the appeal court.

Buhari is a candidate again this year.

In one state election, it took close to three years for the election tribunal to confirm the winner after his opponent had already been sworn in.