

Former Black Panther convicted in Atlanta, Georgia murder trial

By Kate Randall
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Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, known in the 1960s as H. Rap Brown, was found guilty March 9 of murdering Sheriff's Deputy Ricky Kinchen. A Fulton County, Georgia jury convicted Al-Amin of 13 charges against him in connection with a shootout with two deputies across the street from his mosque in Atlanta two years ago. He could face the death penalty.

Al-Amin, 58, was a former leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s and later became a leader of the Black Panther Party. He converted to Islam 30 years ago while in prison on a robbery charge. Upon his release, he moved to Atlanta, where he owned a grocery store in the city's West End and led National Ummah, an Islamic group working to reduce poverty, crime and drugs in poor neighborhoods.

After a three-week trial, the jury deliberated for 10 hours before delivering the guilty verdict. The sentencing phase of the trial is scheduled to begin March 11, and jurors must decide whether Al-Amin should be executed or sentenced to life imprisonment. Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the capital punishment in 1976, the state of Georgia has put 27 prisoners to death, including 4 in 2001.

During the trial, the defense argued that Al-Amin was a victim of ongoing harassment by law enforcement authorities in retribution for his political views, dating back decades. In 1995 Al-Amin was accused of aggravated assault after an Atlanta man claimed he shot him. The charges were later dropped when the man recanted his statement and said he had been pressured by authorities to identify Al-Amin as the shooter.

At the murder trial, Al-Amin's defense attorney's argued that his arrest was a case of mistaken identity. They put George Wilson, a man who lived at Al-Amin's mosque, on the stand who testified that

another man—known as Mustapha—shot the deputies. The prosecution tried to discredit Wilson's testimony, pointing out that he had said nothing about this earlier.

The defense presented only two days of testimony, centering on inconsistencies in the testimony of Deputy Aldranon English, the other officer involved in the shootout on March 16, 2000. English was shot but not seriously injured in the incident. English identified Al-Amin as the man who shot him and his partner when they attempted to serve him with a warrant. The warrant was issued after Al-Amin failed to appear in court earlier that year on charges of receiving stolen property and impersonating a police officer.

Deputy English claimed that he had fired back at his assailant, but when Al-Amin was apprehended four days after the shooting he showed no signs of injury. The defense also pointed out that English said the shooter had gray eyes; Al-Amin's are brown.

The defense also attempted to challenge the prosecution's evidence in connection with the murder weapon. Ballistics tests showed that a Browning 9mm pistol found in the vicinity when Al-Amin was captured was connected to the shooting. Defense attorney Jack Martin contended that FBI agents could have planted the murder weapon at the scene, but Fulton County Judge Stephanie Manis would not allow him to pursue this theory.

Al-Amin spent most of the past two years in jail awaiting trial. This past January, Judge Manis charged that the former Black Panther leader had violated a gag order, and would no longer be allowed to make phone calls, send mail or receive any visitors other than his attorneys. The ruling followed a telephone interview given by Al-Amin to the *New York Times*, reiterating his claim of innocence in connection with the shootings of Deputies Kinchen and English.

In the interview, Al-Amin told the *Times*: “The FBI has a file on me containing 44,000 documents, but prior to this incident, their investigation has produced no fruits, no indictments, no arrests. At some point, they had to make something happen to justify all the investigations and all the money they’ve spent.”

Amin said the gag order denied him basic constitutional protections, commenting at the time, “I can’t even say I’m innocent.... Do you know of any other defendant who is not allowed to say he is innocent? It’s just part of the same continual persecution and prosecution against me.”

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