

Former Black Panther Jamil Al-Amin sentenced to life in prison

By Peter Daniels
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Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, the Muslim minister who, as H. Rap Brown, was a leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s and later a leader of the Black Panther Party, was sentenced last week to life in prison. Al-Amin was convicted earlier this month in connection with the death of a sheriff's deputy in Atlanta two years ago. The jury, after deliberating for five hours, rejected prosecution demands for the death penalty, but took the option of a life sentence without parole.

Al-Amin, 58, continues to insist on his innocence, and will appeal his conviction. Ed Brown, himself a civil rights and SNCC activist in the 1960s who did not follow his younger brother's path into the Panthers or Islam, but has remained close to him, stated that Al-Amin told him after his arrest, "Notwithstanding what you've read, I didn't shoot anybody." Ed Brown added, "If Jamil says he didn't do it, he didn't do it. He's not going to tell me something that is not true."

Ed Brown believes that the police and FBI may have targeted his brother, who changed his name after converting to Islam in the 1970s.

Al-Amin's conviction was based on a decision by the jury to overlook numerous inconsistencies in the prosecution case. The sheriff's deputy who survived the March 16, 2000 shootout, which took place when two cops attempted to serve a warrant on Al-Amin, positively identified Al-Amin as his assailant. The deputy, however, said that the gunman had gray eyes; Al-Amin's eyes are brown. The officer also said that he had returned fire and shot his assailant in the stomach. Police reports mentioned blood at the scene, and the police used this to get a warrant to search Al-Amin's belongings for bloodied clothing or other signs of injury. However, when Al-Amin was arrested four days later he had no injuries.

Al-Amin has argued that he is the victim of a government vendetta that has its origins in events that took place more than three decades ago, and is also related to his current prominence as a Muslim cleric. Several aspects of the trial support this charge.

The head of the FBI team that arrested Al-Amin four days after the Atlanta shooting did not report to his supervisors that one of his agents, Ron Campbell, kicked and spat at the defendant. This same FBI agent was involved in a 1995 killing in Philadelphia, in which he shot a man he was trying to arrest for skipping a court date on charges of assaulting two police officers. In that case, Campbell claimed he shot Glenn Thomas when he was faced with a weapon, but an autopsy showed that Thomas had been shot in the back of the head. Campbell was later exonerated in the killing.

Fulton County Superior Court Judge Stephanie Manis refused to allow the defense to raise the actions of white FBI agents in covering up Campbell's assault on Al-Amin. Defense attorneys wanted to tell jurors that they had to consider the possibility that FBI agents planted key evidence—an assault rifle and handgun—near Al-Amin when he was arrested. "You may not ask the race question ... to show planting of evidence," the judge said. "I believe it is too speculative. It also has a substantial danger of diverting the jury."

Al-Amin has been the victim of continuous official harassment in recent years. His brother, Ed Brown, is quoted in the March 18 issue of the *Nation* magazine as saying, "Harassment, sometimes routine and petty, sometimes pretty serious. Just one damn thing after another. No matter how absurd. The police simply would not leave my brother alone ... an ongoing police vendetta."

Immediately after the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Al-Amin was picked up by the authorities for questioning. He was released without a shred of evidence being presented tying him to the attack.

Two years later, in August 1995, FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents arrested Al-Amin in a month-old shooting case. He was released later when the victim of the shooting said he had not seen the shooter but had been threatened with jail if he did not implicate Al-Amin.

It has also been pointed out that the March 16, 2000 events took place less than a month following the acquittal of four New York police officers in the killing of Amadou Diallo, an African Muslim immigrant. Tension was high in black neighborhoods of major cities around the country.

As Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, a former SNCC field secretary and current professor at the University of Massachusetts, wrote in the above-mentioned *Nation* article, “One has to wonder ... why, in the climate created by those events, the Atlanta authorities chose to act as they did. Why was it necessary to send into a Muslim community, under cover of darkness, heavily armed men wearing flak jackets to bring in a respected and beloved religious leader, a figure of fixed address and regular and predictable habits? And this in the service of a warrant for charges they describe as relatively minor. Who authorized this action and in this manner? Was this abysmally poor judgment, or deliberate provocation?”

Supporters of Al-Amin have pointed out that he incurred the wrath of the authorities and embarrassed the middle-class civil rights spokesmen as long ago as 1965, when, as the chairman of the Washington DC affiliate of SNCC, he was invited to a meeting, along with other civil rights figures, with President Lyndon Johnson at the White House. Thelwell relates Brown’s report on this meeting. “Rap told me that LBJ had entered the meeting expressing his great displeasure at all-night demonstrations outside the White House, which were so noisy that ‘his little girls’ had been unable to sleep. The courtiers each in their turn had expressed distress and apologies for this inconvenience to the presidential family. Rap, when his turn came, said that he too was real sad that for one night the presidential daughters’ repose had been disturbed, but

black people in the South had been unable to sleep in peace and security for a hundred years. What did the President plan to do about that? He had thought that this was what they were meeting to discuss.” Johnson and the civil rights establishment were livid.

Brown was one of the major figures targeted by the notorious Cointelpro counterintelligence program set up by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. He was indicted for inciting a riot in Cambridge, Maryland in 1967, and was put on the FBI’s Most Wanted List when he skipped his Maryland court date—shortly after two of his allies died in a car bombing.

Cointelpro led to provocations and police killings of Black Panther leaders and others, as well as frame-ups such as those of Elmer “Geronimo” Pratt, released only a few years ago after decades behind bars for a murder he did not commit.

The surveillance and harassment of Brown, if they ever ended, seem to have resumed in the 1990s, as he emerged as an increasingly prominent Muslim religious figure with a national as well as local following. Ed Brown has raised the question as to whether a prominent Muslim cleric like his brother can get a fair trial in the wake of the September 11 attacks, at a time when hundreds of Muslim immigrants continue to languish in indefinite detention with no rights and no charges brought against them.

Al-Amin’s supporters include several hundred civil rights activists, black political figures, Muslim religious leaders and others who signed an advertisement published in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* during the trial asking for a “fair and careful weighing of the evidence.” The ad was signed by Julian Bond, former Black Panther president Elaine Brown, poets Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, folk singer Pete Seeger, and former Washington DC Mayor Marion Barry, among others.

Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., also issued a statement expressing her “concern about fairness and justice in the trial of Mr. Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin.”

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