

Majority of Boston residents oppose death penalty for marathon bomber Tsarnaev

Nick Barrickman
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A recent NPR Boston-area poll found that the majority of the public opposes sentencing convicted Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to death. Tsarnaev was found guilty earlier this month of 30 charges stemming from the April 2013 bombing that killed three and wounded 264 others. Seventeen of the 30 charges carry a possible death sentence.

The sentencing phase for Tsarnaev is expected to begin on Tuesday. The Boston-area WBUR poll found that 58 percent of responders during the month of April favored life imprisonment without parole for Tsarnaev. This figure represented a 9 percentage point growth in support for imprisonment over execution of Tsarnaev from a month earlier. Similarly, those in support of executing the 21 year-old diminished from 38 percent a month ago to 31 percent today.

On Friday, the *Boston Globe* published a front-page statement by the parents of Martin Richard, one of the victims who died from a bomb set by Dzhokhar, asking for federal prosecutors to take the death penalty “off the table.”

“We urge the Department of Justice to bring the case to a close,” Bill and Denise Richard stated, adding, “We are in favor of and would support the Department of Justice in taking the death penalty off the table in exchange for the defendant spending the rest of his life in prison without any possibility of release and waiving all of his rights to appeal.”

The state of Massachusetts has abolished the death penalty, which is broadly opposed within the population. However, since Tsarnaev’s trial is being conducted at the federal level, a sentence of death is possible. Since the trial’s beginning, US officials have signaled their intention to pursue the death penalty despite Massachusetts’s laws proscribing it at the state level.

Boston-area residents’ negative attitudes toward the death penalty have grown despite attempts by federal prosecutors and the media to prepare the grounds for Tsarnaev’s execution by inundating the population with lurid details of the carnage caused by Dzhokhar and his older brother, Tamerlan, who was killed in a shootout with police in the days after the bombings occurred.

The aftermath of the bombings became the occasion for a massive mobilization of police and military forces in the city of Boston and its surrounding area. A state of siege was imposed. Metropolitan Boston was occupied by heavily-armed police and National Guard troops, who conducted warrantless searches in residential neighborhoods while armored vehicles patrolled the streets and military helicopters circled overhead.

The unprecedented nature of this operation was met without a protest within the mainstream political and media establishment, which continues to maintain a wall of silence surrounding what amounted to a de facto dry run for a police dictatorship.

Speaking in response to the call by the parents of Martin Richard for prosecutors to waive the death penalty, US Attorney Carmen Ortiz said the US government would still press for the maximum penalty for Tsarnaev. “I care deeply about their [Bill and Denise Richard’s] views and the views of the other victims and survivors. As the case moves forward, we will continue to do all we can to protect and vindicate those injured and those who have passed away,” Ortiz said.

The federal government’s determination to execute Tsarnaev is no doubt motivated by its eagerness to eliminate anyone in a position to give information that conflicts with the official narrative surrounding the

Boston Marathon bombings. In May 2013—a month after the bombings—Ibragim Todashev, a friend of the older Tsarnaev and, like him, an ethnic Chechen, was gunned down in his Florida apartment by an FBI interrogator from Boston while being questioned about his ties to the brothers. As with the federal government’s interactions with the Tsarnaevs, the circumstances surrounding Todashev’s death have never been fully explained.

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev may possess knowledge in connection with the US intelligence agencies’ prior communications with older brother Tamerlan. In 2011, the FBI, having received warnings about Tamerlan’s proclivities for Islamic extremism from both Russian and Saudi Arabian security services, subjected the older brother to a “threat assessment.” His communications and internet activity were monitored and face-to-face interviews were conducted with him and his family members. The FBI’s assessment was later inexplicably closed.

Just weeks later, homicides in the Boston suburb of Waltham, in which Tamerlan has been posthumously named a suspect, occurred on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. Despite one of the victims, Brendan Mess, being identified as a “best friend” of Tsarnaev, authorities did not seek to question the latter, allowing the case to go cold.

In early 2012, Tsarnaev was allowed to travel unhindered to Dagestan in Russia’s North Caucasus region, where he made contact with known Islamist separatist terrorist leaders. He was later allowed to return to the US without being stopped or questioned.

Last year, attorneys representing Dzhokhar accused the FBI of seeking to recruit the older brother as an informant within the Muslim community and asked that the agency turn over all information pertaining to such operations. This request, however, was denied by the federal government.

There also has been little attempt to explain the role of Ruslan Tsarni, an uncle of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar. Tsarni was previously married to the daughter of a high-ranking CIA official and ran an organization, the Congress of Chechen International Organizations, which provided material aid to Chechen separatists fighting against the Russian government. The group was headquartered at the home of Tsarni’s father-in-law, Graham Fuller, a top-level CIA official in the

1980s.



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