

Former Georgia prosecutor indicted for shielding killers of Ahmaud Arbery

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Former Georgia prosecutor Jackie Johnson was indicted on September 2 for shielding the men who chased down and murdered Ahmaud Arbery on February 23, 2020.

A Glynn County, Georgia grand jury returned a felony charge against the former Brunswick Judicial Court District Attorney for violating her oath of office, along with a misdemeanor for hindering a law enforcement officer.

Arbery, a 25-year-old African-American man, was pursued by three white men as he was jogging in the Satilla Shores neighborhood just outside Brunswick, Georgia. One of the men confronted and shot Arbery with a shotgun at close range.

The father and son—Gregory and Travis McMichael—armed themselves and followed the jogger in their pickup truck, while their neighbor William “Roddie” Bryan joined the chase in his own vehicle and blocked Arbery’s escape. As Bryan recorded the incident on smartphone from his car, Travis got out of the pickup and shot Arbery several times while his father, who was also armed with a handgun, looked on from the bed of the pickup truck.

Brunswick law enforcement authorities did not arrest any of the three attackers and they remained free for more than two months until Bryan’s video of the shooting was posted online. Up to that point, Gregory McMichael claimed that he and his son were attempting to make a “citizen’s arrest” of Arbery, who they claimed was behind a “string of robberies” in Satilla Shores. There is no evidence that Arbery ever committed any crimes in the area.

The indictment against prosecutor Johnson includes a transcript of a phone call from Gregory McMichael that says, “Jackie, this is Greg. Could you call me as soon as you possibly can? My son and I have been involved

in a shooting and I need some advice right away.”

Although there is no record showing that Johnson called McMichael back, the indictment states that Johnson showed “favor and affection” toward Gregory during the investigation, and interfered with police officers at the scene by “directing that Travis McMichael should not be placed under arrest.”

The evidence for Johnson’s favorable treatment of the killers includes the fact that Greg McMichael had worked as an investigator in her office, retiring in 2019, and that he also previously worked as a police officer in the area.

On March 8, 2020 two Glynn County commissioners accused Johnson of preventing the McMichaels from being arrested immediately. Commissioner Allen Booker said at the time, “The police at the scene went to her, saying they were ready to arrest both of them. These were the police at the scene who had done the investigation. She shut them down to protect her friend McMichael.” Another Commissioner, Peter Murphy, said that police at the scene had concluded that there was probable cause to apprehend the McMichaels, but they “were told not to make the arrest” by Johnson’s office.

The attorney for the Arbery family, Lee Merritt, said in a statement that prosecutors “must be held accountable when they interfere with investigations in order to protect friends and law enforcement.” Ahmaud Arbery’s mother, Wanda Cooper Jones, posted her reaction on Facebook, stating, “Former DA Jackie Johnson....Indicted!!! JusticeForMyBaby!!!!”

The process, which has now taken more than fifteen months to complete, began after the announcement in May 2020 by Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr that an investigation by state and federal authorities was being conducted into the handling of the killing of

Arbery. Carr asked the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to investigate both DA Johnson's actions as well as those of Waycross Judicial Circuit District Attorney George Barnhill. So far, no charges have been announced against Barnhill.

First Johnson and then Barnhill abruptly recused themselves from the investigation of Arbery's murder. In a letter to the Glynn County Police Department, Barnhill stated that the McMichaels were in "hot pursuit" of a burglary suspect "with solid firsthand probable cause, in their neighborhood" and it "appears their intent was to stop and hold this criminal suspect until law enforcement arrived. Under Georgia Law this is perfectly legal." Barnhill, furthermore, wrote that "it clearly appears" that the McMichaels had "firearms being carried in an open fashion."

While the indictment of former District Attorney Johnson—she lost her bid for reelection on November 4—is by no means a guarantee that a conviction is forthcoming, the exposure of the details of the protection given to Arbery's killers is an illustration of exactly how the "law enforcement" system functions in towns and cities across the US.

If the video of Travis McMichael shooting Ahmaud Arbery had not surfaced, there would likely have never been any investigation into what happened on February 23, 2020, and the murder by a former police officer and his son would have been deemed justified.

Individuals who are either currently active or former members of police departments carry out acts of wanton and brutal violence against working class and poor people on a regular basis and they are permitted to lie about what they have done and are simultaneously protected from prosecution by authorities within the system. Meanwhile, these working-class individuals—if they are lucky enough to survive the violence—are themselves often charged, convicted and sent to jail on the basis of false evidence and testimony manufactured for the purpose of covering up the real crimes committed against them.

While the racism of law enforcement officers, prosecutors and judges and others plays a role in the targeting of individuals for this treatment, police violence and murder are directed against working-class and poor people of all races and ethnicities. A database of police murders maintained by the *Washington Post* shows, for example, that the total number of people

killed by police in the state of Georgia since 2015 is 240. This includes 95 white, 95 black, 14 Hispanic, 3 Other and 33 Unknown. More than half of these individuals did not flee before they were shot and the majority of them were men between the ages of 18 and 44. Approximately 10 percent of the shootings did not include police body camera footage, and therefore the explanations of what happened provided by authorities is subject to serious doubt.



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